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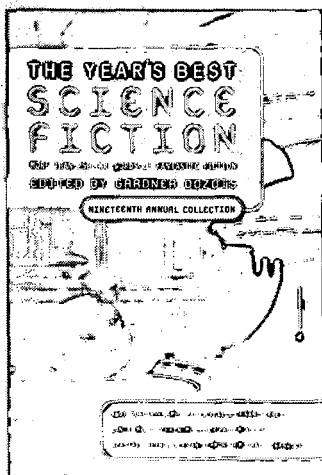


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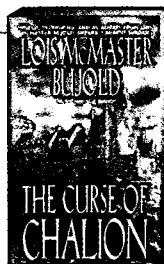


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NOVELLAS

- A DEMOCRACY OF TROLLS 7 Charles Coleman Finlay
THE DRIVE-IN PUERTO RICO 125 Lucius Shepard

NOVELETS

- SOMETHING BY THE SEA 77 Jeffrey Ford
THE SLEEPING WOMAN 102 Robert Reed
IN THE CITY OF DEAD NIGHT 198 Tanith Lee
WATCHING MATTHEW 219 Damon Knight

SHORT STORIES

- OPENCLOSE 97 Terry Bisson
SOCIAL DREAMING OF THE FRIN 178 Ursula K. Le Guin

POEMS

- FOOTNOTE 121 Robert Frazier

DEPARTMENTS

- BOOKS TO LOOK FOR 56 Charles de Lint
BOOKS 66 Elizabeth Hand
PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS 122 Paul Di Filippo
A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK 187 Gregory Benford
COMING ATTRACTIONS 197
CURIOSITIES 242 John Eggeling

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Charlie Finlay lives in Columbus, Ohio, with his wife and their two sons. Since his first appearance in our pages little more than a year ago, he has quickly become one of our most popular writers, regaling us with stories like his intergalactic spy caper "The Political Officer" (April) or his alternative view of the United States in the last days of the eighteenth century, "We Come Not to Praise Washington" (August). Now he turns his hand to fantasy with a story both traditional and unusual, the tale of a changeling boy. Mr. Finlay reports that he is expanding this story into a novel, but he promises to offer us another adventure or two before too long.

A Democracy of Trolls

By Charles Coleman Finlay

“LET GO.”

L

Windy tugged her shoulder free from Ragweed's grip, cradling the baby protectively between her milk-heavy breasts and the wall of the cave. "No."

"We took a vote and voted you should put the baby down."

"Mosswater is dead, so his vote doesn't count."

"That's true. Mosswater is dead," Ragweed said flatly, remarkably unmoved by his brother's demise. He ground his jaw so hard the big flat teeth in back squeaked.

The sound annoyed Windy. She turned to snap at him and saw his face darken with a new idea.

"But the baby's dead too!" he said triumphantly. "That's why you should let go of it."

"Let's have another vote."

Ragweed smiled, showing off his gray, cracked teeth. "That's a idea. All those in favor of you putting down the dead baby?" He raised his hand. "And those against?"

Windy raised hers. "It's a tie. So I can do what I want."

"Hey! Wait a moment — "

Before he could protest, she stood up and leaned forward on one long-armed knuckled hand. The Sun had just sunk low enough so they could go outside again. She left the overhung ledge of the cave, pressing past the tree and through the overgrown shrubs. Leaves wet from a night and day of rain brushed against her, and water ran in little rivulets down her back, filling the cracks in her skin. She lifted her head into the branches to inhale the sharp clean scent of the pine needles. Droplets rolled over the hard angles of her cheeks in place of the tears she refused to cry.

Windy walked to her favorite open spot on the slope in the long shadow of the mountain's sheltering spur. From there she peered over the pines into the meadow below, and, surrounded by shade, watched the last light flow out of the valley. Uncheered by the dying Sun, she rocked the baby in the crook of her massive arm.

She glanced up to the mouth of the cave. Ragweed dug in the dirt with his big knobby fingers, then shoved his hands into his mouth. The soil was rich in spots where leaves and needles piled deep enough to decay and the rain sent worms swimming toward the surface. That had to be what Ragweed ate. Windy stirred the compost with fingerlike toes and a fat red wriggly worm squirmed out. She left it alone. She had no appetite.

Ragweed turned his head in her direction, wrinkled his nose, and snorted. "It's already starting to stink!"

She smelled it too. Her nose was sensitive to the scent of dead things, a main part of her diet. She knew her baby was starting to rot even though it had been dead less than a day. "I like the way she smells! And I'm not putting her down!"

Ragweed shrugged, then resumed his digging.

Windy stared at the little forlorn creature limp in her arms. She had been such a lively baby, so adventuresome, afraid of nothing. Hardly feared daylight at all. She used to crawl away at the first hint of darkness. So last night, when the rain poured down, and she crawled out of their crowded crack of rock, Windy listened to her laugh and took the chance to rub butt with Ragweed. She was just getting excited herself when she heard the bigtooth lion's roar and ran out to rescue her daughter.

She chased the bigtooth off at once, but by the time she reached her

little girl it was too late. Her daughter's skull was crushed, all soft, pulpy, and misshapen. Like a rotten pumpkin. Windy had eaten pumpkins once, near one of the villages of the black-haired people. But now, thinking of her baby, she'd never eat pumpkins again, no matter how tasty they were.

She felt like she'd never do anything again.

The last finger of light lingered on the green face of the meadow. Ragweed strolled over and sat down beside her. He noticed the worm twisting in the leaves, picked it up, and offered it to her. She stuck out her tongue to show she wasn't hungry, to say no. He popped the worm in his mouth, chewed once, and swallowed.

"It's almost dark," he said. "We should go down to that turtle shell — " that was what he called the cave that people built themselves to live in " — and see if Snapper's still there."

"Why?"

Ragweed shrugged. "Might be something to eat."

"Those animals might try to kill us, the way they killed Mosswater last night when he went to warn them about the lion."

Ragweed scratched his head, then probed one of his nostrils with a carrot-sized forefinger. Stirring up his brains in search of an idea, she guessed.

"We could try to scare them away," he offered.

She had guessed right. "We've been trying to scare them away for months," she reminded him.

"That's true," he said slowly. "They're probably pretty scared by now."

He didn't seem to notice her answering silence. She sagged on her haunches and studied him thoughtfully. Ragweed was the handsomest troll she'd ever seen — he had a beautifully shaped head that sloped back to a nice point, a brow so thick you could hardly see his eyes beneath it, no neck to speak of, arms like the trunks of trees, and a belly as round and dark as the new Moon. Short, bristly hairs ran down between his shoulders and into the crack of his buttocks. Just looking at him used to send shivers up her spine and make her feel all juicy inside. She'd flirted with him, and he'd responded, and she was as happy as any troll could be until she became pregnant and realized that Ragweed was not the sharpest rock in the pile. He only looked smart compared to his brother, Mosswater. Of

course, she couldn't be that much smarter. Before it was time for her baby to be born, she let Ragweed and Mosswater persuade her to come down out of the mountains to this stupid little valley.

Ragweed grunted. "When Mosswater and I came down here a couple years back, the turtle shell didn't have Snapper in it."

"Well, this year it did!" She'd heard the same statement a thousand times before and she was tired of it. But more than that, she wanted to blame Ragweed for Mosswater's death — Mosswater was stupid but very kind, and used to bring sweet little slugs for her baby — and she wanted to blame Ragweed for the baby's death too. She wanted to blame somebody, anybody, because if it was somebody else's fault, then it wasn't hers.

Ragweed rooted idly in the dirt. "I'm hungry."

Windy sighed. She'd heard that a thousand times as well. She stood up. Doing anything was better than doing nothing. "Come on. Let's go down to the turtle shell. Maybe they'll be scared off. Maybe we'll find something to eat."

He clapped his hands. The crack echoed off the mountain walls, scattering birds from the trees. "That's right!" he said. "All you need is some food, then you'll put that baby down."

They walked down the familiar slope. They'd varied the path some every night looking for new sources of food, but there were only so many ways to go. Ragweed turned over logs and broke off pieces of stumps, but they were the same logs and stumps he'd searched a dozen times before. They hadn't seen the carcass of so much as a dead sparrow in two weeks; it had been a month since they'd found that deer before the wild dogs got to it. Ragweed paused to snack on a nest of termites, then a bunch of grubs and crunchy hundred-leg bugs inside a stump. She waited for him to stuff his face. When they continued on their way, he grabbed the lower branches of trees and chewed the leaves off the ends. The rain moistened them up a bit so they didn't taste so chokingly dry. The scent enticed Windy, but not enough to make her eat.

They arrived at the wide meadow beside the pond and Ragweed waded into the water to slake his thirst. Windy's throat was terribly parched despite the drippings she'd licked off the cave roof, so she followed him, holding the baby out of the water as she bent down to take a drink.

Ragweed splashed over and rubbed his hands on her bottom.

"Thhpppppt!" Water sprayed out of her mouth. "Stop that!"

"Nothing to interrupt us now," he leered.

She ignored him, bending to take another sip. He reached around and squeezed her breast.

"Yow!" Windy hopped away with a splash, bared her teeth, and smacked him with a backhanded swing.

"Hey!" he hollered. "What did I do?"

"That hurt." She turned away, sloshed out of the pond, and started her three-legged gait through the woods without him. Her breasts ached like a bad tooth. They'd been leaking all evening and she didn't know what to do. She guessed they'd dry up in a few days, but right now she'd rather step in fire than have him touch them.

Ragweéd hurried to catch up. They crested the chestnut ridge where they'd sat most nights through the late spring and summer. Mosswater had been the only one brave — or stupid — enough to approach the turtle shell night after night. But he was that way. He did something one time and then got stuck doing it over and over even if it didn't work because he couldn't think of anything else.

The rain-heavy breeze carried good scents. Windy smelled the fruit ripening on the pear trees away down the valley. Off in the direction of the sunset, toward the river, she thought she sniffed something dead, maybe drowned in yesterday's flood. Small, but still a good meal if she'd been hungry enough to go looking for it. She turned her head the other direction toward the little hollow of land where the cave was. She smelled Mosswater strongly above all else, and the faint scent of the lion, and goat's blood a couple days old. The squash were ripening, and the corn, and the beans inside that little thorn wall. And then she smelled something else....

Ragweed caught the same scent. "Hot diggety!" he shouted, making an enthusiastic scooping motion with his hands before he ran down the hill. "Fresh rotten meat!"

"Be careful!" she cried out. But Snapper was dead, the one that came out and shouted at Mosswater and threw fire at him. At least she thought he was. Holding her baby tight to her chest, she ran after Ragweed.

Ragweed stopped beside his dead brother, whose body sprawled face down in the mud. Windy paused beside him and only then did her ears, which were better than the average troll's, certainly much better than

Ragweed's, detect the high-pitched crying. When Ragweed turned to enter the cave she tripped him, grabbing hold of his wrist so he couldn't break his fall. As he squawked, hitting the ground, she rushed past him and inside.

The odors hit her first. The dead man — Snapper — and the dead woman. There was something wrong with the woman's flesh. The smell of baby poop and urine were also strong. Windy wrinkled her nose, swiveled her head around until she saw the woman's corpse in the corner with the baby sitting there chewing on her hair. Its eyes were shut, so tired it could barely sit up straight as it cried.

Ragweed burst through the doorway behind her. "Ho there! Save some for me!"

He shoved her down and she kicked at him. He dodged her foot, hopping ponderously over her outstretched leg. She dropped her dead daughter, dove under Ragweed's groping arms, and slid across the dirt floor on her tender breasts to grab the crying baby first. She curled around it protectively.

"Go ahead," Ragweed said, clearly disappointed. "It's not much. Won't fill your belly up."

The baby continued to wail as it snuggled into Windy's arms. It rubbed its face around her breast until its tiny mouth closed on the hard pebble of her nipple. It didn't have much of a suck compared to her little girl, but then it didn't need much of one either.

Ragweed picked up the woman's hand, stuck the fingers in his mouth, and chewed on them. After a couple crunches, he spit them out and dropped her arm. "This one's still warm, but she's been sick. Ought to let her rot for a couple days. She'll taste better with bugs in her."

Windy wrinkled her flat nose again. The dead woman was this baby's mother; she suddenly felt quite protective of her. "Go chew on Snapper then," she said. "He's been dead longer."

"All gristle, no fat, like enough," muttered Ragweed, but he crossed the room.

Windy caressed the baby's head. It had such beautiful black hair, disguising its misshapen skull and lack of a brow. Large — gorgeously large — eyes in the painfully flat face stared right at her before they fluttered shut. The ache in Windy's heart eased as quickly as the soreness in her breast.

"Ack!"

Ragweed jumped back so hard he fell on his bottom. He bounced up and retreated across the room to Windy's side.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Go look for yourself! I'm not getting near it, not if it was a rotten mammut on a hot summer night and I hadn't eaten anything in ten days."

Windy carefully cradled the suckling baby to her, took a step forward, and then almost turned to stone. She didn't need to get any closer to see the amber-colored ampules strung around the dead man's neck. They were magic, sunlight trapped in warm ice. If either one cracked accidentally it could kill them both. She hopped backward so fast the baby lost the nipple. Its eyes flew wide open.

"You'll have to share it now," Ragweed said.

Windy kept one eye on Snapper's body as if he might leap up and attack her. The baby stretched its neck, trying to get its mouth back on her breast. "Share what?"

"The live meat."

"No!" She dodged his sudden grasp, bolted out the door and into the yard. He chased after her.

"We always share meat," he said.

"This isn't meat — it's a baby!"

He slouched back on his haunches and laughed. "Don't be crazy! You're just sad because you lost your girl. You don't mean to keep that thing."

She hadn't realized that was exactly what she meant to do until she heard him say it. "I can. And I will."

He thumped his knuckles on his chest to frighten her. She wasn't impressed and frowned at him until he gave it up. "If that's how you feel," he said, pacing in a circle around her, "then we'll just have to take a vote. All those in favor of eating the live meat, raise your hand."

He threw his hand up into the air, looking around the way he always did at meetings to see who was voting with him. She ignored him, and, gently as she could, switched the baby around, so it could drink from the other sore and swollen breast.

"All right then, everybody in favor of keeping the meat for a baby, raise your hand."

Windy lifted hers as she looked down, making a kissy mouth at the child. It stopped sucking long enough to laugh and reached up to touch her face.

"That's two against one," she said. "We win."

"It can't vote!"

"Well, it raised its hand." She really just hoped to confuse and distract Ragweed, because even if Mosswater was still alive and they both outvoted her, she wasn't about to give up this new baby. She reached down to tickle its belly and saw it was a boy. "He heard you, and he raised his hand. So there."

"But — !" Ragweed sputtered off, then slammed his hands down, splattering mud everywhere.

The baby jerked at the sound, but she made another kissy mouth and a smoochy sound and he giggled again. His eyelids seemed very heavy as he swallowed gulp after gulp.

"You aren't going to keep that thing, are you? It's an animal."

"Is not." He had eyes just like her darling girl, she decided. Whatever he was — whatever people were — they were more than animals, even if they weren't trolls.

Ragweed circled her. "It's a maggot, that's what it is."

"He's a big strong baby." To be truthful, he wasn't big or strong. But he was a baby and now he was her baby.

"It's a maggot. It's little, white, and it wouldn't make a mouthful, and you found it crawling on a dead body. Maggot, maggot, maggot!"

"He is not a maggot!" She threw a clump of mud at Ragweed but it missed and smacked wetly against the side of the turtle shell.

"Well, it ain't a slug." Ragweed hurled a mudball back at her, with better aim. She ducked, blocking it with her free arm, as he wandered over to the garden and shoved a half-ripe gourd into his mouth. He turned over some leaves near the bottoms of the plants. "Slugs have stripes," he said sullenly around a mouthful of pulp and seeds. "Least some do. The tasty ones."

He grazed through the garden without offering anything to her. Windy rocked her massive forearm until the baby fell sleep. After a while she rose and ate a little also. Her hunger had returned. "What are you going to do about Mosswater?" she asked.

Ragweed looked up at the sky. It was getting late. He shrugged. "Thought I'd drag him back up to our cave, shove him in the back."

"Maybe tomorrow night?" Windy hated this time of year, when the nights were too short and too warm without enough time to do anything but eat.

Ragweed knuckle-walked over to his brother's corpse. "I don't want to come back here tomorrow."

"Maybe we could put him in the turtle shell with Snapper."

"Huh." Ragweed poked the dead body. "We could do that."

Windy felt so relieved she paused to empty her bladder. She didn't want to come back here tomorrow night either. She helped Ragweed drag and push Mosswater's body through the narrow doorway. While Ragweed laid his brother in the corner farthest from the door and window, she picked up her daughter and placed her beside the dead woman. She tucked the hand with the missing fingers under the little girl, and draped the other arm across her body. She carefully avoided Snapper's body.

Ragweed waited in the doorway. "You done?"

She nodded and walked outside with him. He stood upright on his hind legs and craned his neck around, looking for stones. "Let's seal up the whole cave," she said.

"With what?"

She waved her hand at the mounds of wood and thorn that surrounded the little cottage. He grunted and set to work. Windy moved the smaller pieces for fear of disturbing the baby, slight though he felt in her arms. They filled in the little hole and the big hole, and heaped mounds around the walls. Windy scooped up clumps of mud with her free hand and packed it in tight around the holes. When they finished, Ragweed walked around it, lifting his leg and spraying. The scent would scare off scavengers and protect their dead.

"Now we have to hurry if we aren't going to get caught out in the Sun," he said.

She looked up. He was right. They raced across the high ridge and she could smell dawn in the air. They halted briefly in the meadow to drink from the swollen pond and she noticed the lion's scent. It too had been here to drink in the night. She decided to blame it for her daughter's death. Then she looked at the child she held.

It's going to be all right, she told herself. Ragweed will let me keep the baby. They would return to the mountains among the hot springs and the good smell of sulfur, away from all the people. Things would be just like they were before.

"We should leave this valley," she said. She thought about her own mother. "We should go home."

"Not until the pears get ripe," said Ragweed, pushing aside the brush in his hurry to hide. He squeezed his huge bulk through the narrow crack, then rolled over on his back and rubbed his big round belly. "The trees full of pears and nobody to eat them but us. I don't want to miss that! They won't be eating any pears back home."

"That's a long time from now," she said, squeezing in after him. "What are we going to eat until then?"

He bared his teeth in a half-grin. "I don't know about you, but I'm hungry for a little maggot."

She turned her back to him and wrapped her arms around the sleeping child.

"YOU AREN'T going to keep it, are you?"

"*Him, not it, mother,*" Windy answered through a mouth full of blueberries. Her large fingers circled the branches, scooping off another bunch of ripe fruit while her mother did the same beside her. The older troll's downy white hair contrasted sharply with her gray skin in the moonlight. "And yes," Windy said, "I am going to keep him."

"We'd heard tales, from Crash, when he went down into the people valleys last year, but I didn't believe him. And then you finally return with it." She frowned.

Windy looked across the bog. Her little boy played in the scrub grass with two little girls his own age but twice his size. Sometimes she scarcely believed it herself.

"Four winters, five summers," her mother said, reproach in her voice. "It's a long time to be away, even if you were ashamed."

"I'm not ashamed." She shoved the blueberries in her mouth and chewed. "We were going to come back that first winter, but the baby —"

"Maggot," her mother interrupted.

She swallowed. "That's what Ragweed calls him."

"I know. He's been telling everyone, but we'd already heard it from Crash. So what do you call it?"

Windy had called the baby by her daughter's name for nearly a year but the boy never answered to it, maybe because she only whispered it to him in his sleep. And then Ragweed called him Maggot so often that it was the only name her boy responded to. She sighed. "Maggot."

Her mother made a rumbling hum in her throat. She plucked the berries off the branches one by one, filling her cupped hand. "Forty-one, forty-two, forty-three for a handful. I can still count higher than anyone else. And faster too. Heh! So that first winter?"

"Terrible." Windy wanted to explain how she tried to leave Ragweed but couldn't, how there was never a good time to sneak away, not so he wouldn't notice. "It was terrible."

"Why?"

"Before winter even, the baby grew so cold. His skin turned all blue at night." She shivered. That winter bloomed into another summer before she found the courage to take her frail child among the icy peaks, and while they hunted food night to night and fattened up again, that summer rotted into winter, and before she knew it four years had passed by as swift as midsummer nights. "So we stayed down in the warmer valleys."

"You should have let it die."

"Him, mother."

"No. It."

Other trolls hulked through the blueberry patches, eating steadily without talking, filling their bellies while the darkness lasted. The children strayed farther away in their play. Maggot was a delicate child, his skin so thin she could practically see through it. The risks he took could stop her heart. She followed after them, conveniently escaping the prick of her mother's comments.

A rock outcropping capped the slope. Windy waded free of the blueberry patch and went to sit by the stones. "Talking with the stupid dead" they called it, because the stories said that these rocks were trolls that let themselves get caught out in the Sun. The best thing about the stupid dead, Windy thought, was that their mistake was always worse than yours.

"Hi, stupid," Windy said, patting the rock as she sat.

Distant mountains formed walls on either side of the high plain and the dark sky, close enough to touch, gave it a comforting cavelike roof. Bringing her son up here for the first time brought back all the memories of her own happy childhood: the bleak beauty of long winter nights — her favorite season before she became a mother — when clusters of the bitter berries on mountain ash gleamed bright against the white skin of wind-swept snow; the scents of rhododendrons blooming under slivered spring moons, laurel at midsummer; huckleberries, blueberries, teaberries, and cranberries, each in its season, as many as she could ever eat; fogs so dense she could open her mouth and drink water straight out of the air, with unexpected frosts even in the summer that cooled her toes while she foraged. She hadn't realized how much she missed the smell of bobcat spray until she came up here and caught a whiff of it again tonight.

Maggot played with the girls on the slope below the blueberry bushes along the edge of the bogs where cranberries grew and the grasses turned all shadow-tipped in autumn. Windy looked beyond him. A herd of giant elk grazed about a mile away, their wide flat antlers rising and falling in silhouette against the sky. She counted seventeen elk before their heads jerked up in unison and they darted away. Leaning forward, she saw a dyrewolf bolt out of the grasses where the elk had been.

Dyrewolves hunted in packs. Where there was one, there were more. "Maggot," Windy said. She didn't speak loudly. Her son's ears were as powerful as a troll's eyes.

He stopped playing and waved to her. The two girls looked up the hill, confused by his actions.

"Stay close by," she said, for his ears only. "There are dyrewolves hunting."

He smacked his lips with a nod of his head, as if he already knew. Then he put his hands to his mouth. "Awroooooooooo!"

It sounded enough like a dyrewolf's cry to send a chill up her spine. He could mimic almost anything. She saw his head turn first, and then the girls'. When she followed their eyes and concentrated, she heard, faintly, the dyrewolf howling in return. "Stay close!" she shouted at the top of her voice.

He waved to her again and she felt better. After that the girls pretended they were scared, running away as he howled like a dyewolf and chased them. The sight of him and the sharp faint shriek of their laughter made Windy smile. But she remained wary. A pack of dyewolves could bring down a solitary full-grown troll. Her son was so much smaller and weaker than the other trolls.

On the steep edge of the slope a stunted grove of red cedars leaned away from the constant wind. When the girls ran in that direction, followed by Maggot, his shoulder-length hair whipped by the hard breeze, Windy was relieved. She could sniff the air and not smell wolves or other dangers in it.

Windy sniffed again, taking in the scent of the trees. Down in the valleys the red cedars reached great heights, but here the tallest barely overtopped a full-grown troll, although, thinking about it, that still made them the tallest plant around. But they were twisted and deformed by the unrelenting pressure of the constant wind, the west face naked and all their tattered branches stretching east. On bad nights, the gusts could tumble trolls and send them rolling across the bog.

Windy watched her son, his pale skin luminous in the partial moonlight. Her son was also a creature from the valleys. She wondered what it would do to him to grow up here in troll country, whether he'd end up deformed in some way like the cedars.

Her mother climbed the rocks, sat down beside her, and pointed to the trees. "Do you know what those look like?"

A trollbird settled on Windy's back and began picking nits off her skin. She stayed still not to disturb it. "They smell like the big cedars that grow farther down the slopes. I was just thinking about that."

"No, that's not it." Her mother stretched out a long arm, grabbed the branch of a blueberry bush, and collected more of the juicy blue-black fruit. "They look like the killing leaves."

Windy didn't know what her mother meant. "Killing leaves?"

"Once, there were many more trolls than there are now. Some of us lived in the southern mountains then. When I was a young girl, I did." Windy had heard all this before, and didn't care much for her mother's childhood stories. "There were people, blackhairs, also living in the southern mountains then. Too many to count or chase away, but they left

us alone and we avoided them. Then other people moved in, just like those who moved into the lower valleys here. The two groups gathered together, against each other, in these big packs. Like dyrewolves on the one side and the little bigtooth lions on the other."

Windy had never heard this story before. The trollbird skittered between her shoulder blades. Her skin twitched.

"The two packs, they had these killing leaves," her mother made a three-sided shape with her fingers, "big ones, one leaf on each tree. They carried them. So we crept down out of the mountains to see them. One morning, before the Sun came up, there were all these horns blowing. We hid in our caves all that day but we couldn't sleep because we knew something was wrong. When we came back to the field that night, it was littered with carrion. More dead men than there are berries on these bushes, the smell so thick it made your stomach swell, like to bursting. And the killing leaves in tatters, shredded, lying this way and that, pieces shaking in the wind." She pointed to the cedars. "They looked just like those trees."

Windy wished she'd never heard this story. "So?"

"People," her mother aimed her finger at Maggot, rolling around with the girls, "did that. Afterward, the winners — the newcomers — came into the high reaches and hunted us. We moved north, and once again men entered the low valleys, and once again hunt us. They killed Mosswater, who was a fine troll almost ready to father children."

"So?"

Her mother's face tightened into a sharp knot. "So? You bring one to live among us. It's wrong. It should be destroyed."

"No!" Windy rose abruptly with her fists clenched. The trollbird whistled and flew off into the night.

Her mother stared at her, as cold as ice. She was the First of the band after many votes, its leader. "You listen to me. You need to get rid of that animal. Then you need to have another child, and by darkness and dew, let us hope it's a boy who can breed with those young girls down there as soon as they're big enough."

"Mother — "

"I'm not done yet!" Windy tensed, but her mother kept on speaking. "Our people have few children and we grow fewer each year. There were

fifty-three in our band when you were a baby, and before that there were seventy-one at one time. Seventy-one! How many do you see now?"

Windy couldn't help herself. She lifted her head and counted. Ragweed and seven others, mostly men, down where the blueberries were thickest, another group of ten over on the next hill, and little clusters of two and three scattered in between. Maggot and the two girls. Her and her mother. "Thirty-two, thirty-three, thirty-four. Thirty-four."

"Thirty-three," corrected her mother.

"That's not a fair question. Frosty took her band and moved away, and — "

"Because the people moved in! They eat all our food and kill us and hunt us away!" The anger faded out of her mother's voice, replaced by weariness. "I see the nights of all trolls drying up, like dew beneath a Sun that never sets." As Windy watched her mother's face intently, understanding for a moment her sense of loss, the old troll chuckled. "Look! The children are playing catch the snake. You loved that game when you were a little girl."

The two girls were running, tossing a snake back and forth between them. Maggot chased after, grabbing at it, as the girls threw it to each other over his head.

Windy laughed too. It was a good-sized serpent — two, maybe three feet long — with its mouth wide open and fangs snapping at the children's arms. Rocky and Blossom were good girls. Windy was so glad Maggot finally had someone his own age to play with.

The snake twined in the air, looping itself in an echo of the crisscross pattern marking its back — the kind that caused sickness if it bit, which made the game more fun. The risk was small because a fast bite couldn't break a troll's skin and if the snake fastened on an arm and bit slowly, there was always plenty of time to grab the head and pull it off it. Windy remembered one time....

Maggot! "No!"

She drummed a short warning on her chest and ran down the slope. All three children froze in fear, and the snake twisted in Blossom's hand, biting down sharply on her arm. "Ow!"

"I've got it," cried Maggot. He grabbed it behind the head and pulled it off.

Windy faltered, then lunged forward. Maggot held the snake up toward her, its long length squirming and twisting around. He kept his grip on it for a second, then let go, and hopped out of the way. Its head turned to strike at him just as Windy's foot came down, smashing it into the ground.

"I caught it eight times," said Rocky, smiling.

"But I caught it eleven!" screamed Blossom.

"But you dropped it four times," Maggot said, "and Rocky picked it up again, and she didn't miss any catches."

Windy patted him on the head. "But Blossom caught it more times, so she wins the game." The snake squirmed frantically in the soft ground beneath her foot.

"But if you take away the times she dropped it, then Rocky wins," Maggot insisted.

Windy wrinkled her thick brow and started unfolding her fingers. Eleven catches, then one, two, three, four drops, that was fifteen. The snake struggled harder so she arched the front part of her foot. When the head squeezed out between her toes, she crossed them and snapped its neck. She lifted the limp snake with her foot to her hand, then offered it to her mother.

"We found it," Rocky complained.

"It's our food," said Blossom.

"You should have eaten it while you had the chance then," said Windy's mother as she took it and bit off half. The bones crunched in her jaw. With a wink, she tossed the other half to the girls. Maggot snatched it first and led them on a chase for it. After she swallowed, she looked up at Windy. "You can't buy my vote with fresh meat, you know."

"I wasn't trying to."

"Leastway, not that little bit." Her eyes grew wistful. "Now a nice bit of rotting carrion — "

"You'll vote however you think best."

"I've already talked with Ragweed, and he's gathering up votes among the men. We'll have enough to exclude it — Maggot — from the band."

"We'll leave then," said Windy.

"Not you, just it."

"Whatever you vote for him, you vote for me. You vote to kill him, you'll have to kill me first. He's my son."

"He could end up carrion," her mother said. "Maybe he'll have an accident. Yes, that could happen. Then you could have more children. We have too few children."

Windy didn't say anything. She noticed the men moving off to the east. The women pounded on the ground and the girls came running. Maggot followed them until Windy beat her knuckles into the sod and told him, "Stay."

He sprinted to her side. "What is it, Mom?"

"Stay with me."

"But Mom!"

She bared her teeth and he quieted down, clambering up her outstretched arm to cling around her shoulder. Sometimes she recalled the way her daughter's fingers and toes dug into her wrinkles and under the cracks in her skin, but she'd grown accustomed to the way Maggot scooted up the outside. She searched through the blueberries until she found his skin, some strange-smelling thing they had scavenged from people, and handed it to him. He wrapped it over his back.

Her mother looked at her in disgust. "Ughh! Why do you carry that stinking thing?"

"Maggot'd be cold without it."

"Then let him be cold. Let him die."

Before Windy could answer, Maggot laughed. "But Grandma! I don't want to die. You're silly."

She grunted and moved off. They needed to be safely underground before the Sun rose to blind and immobilize them.

"Mom," said Maggot, "I want to walk."

"No dear, we're in a hurry." They had lingered almost too long, lethargic in the summer heat. Even so trolls moved quickly when the scent of dawn electrified the air and there was no way Maggot could keep up with the others over this rough terrain for long. She'd learned that the hard way these last few years. Only because of Maggot's recent increase in size and speed had she finally relented and let Ragweed lead her back to troll country.

"But Mom, I want to talk to the other kids."

"I'll catch up with them."

When she did, the girls' mothers scowled at her, their brow ridges

sagging like tree branches covered with ice. Windy tried to find words to ease their disapproval, but they ignored her. She lapsed once more into the canyon of silence that had first appeared between her and Ragweed. Whispers and giggles told her that the girls would not be stifled by the awkwardness of the older women.

Rocky was the first to run along at her heels. "Hey there, baby," she taunted Maggot. "Baby riding on your mama's neck."

"Baby, baby, baby," cried Blossom. "Watch out! There's a snake crawling on your back!" She jumped up and tried to snatch away Maggot's skin, but missed, dissolving in laughter.

Windy couldn't see Maggot's expression, but his grip tightened on her and she smelled his uncertainty. "One time, down-down-down," he stuttered, talking to the girls, "in the valleys by the big people caves, we'd been out hunting for food all night and we found a nice big dead humpback."

"A whole humpback?" asked Rocky eagerly.

"Yeah, and Ragweed ate soooo much, he got really tired, and he fell asleep, and I put my skin over his face, so he wouldn't know that it was getting light out, and then, when the Sun came up, he'd turn into stone."

"No you didn't," said Blossom.

"Did too!"

"He's not a bunch of stones," argued Rocky.

"No. Mom took the blanket off his head and woke him up."

Windy smiled. That's exactly what she *did* do, every single time Maggot played that trick on Ragweed. As the children continued to talk, she admired the way Maggot stopped the teasing by distracting the girls. Then, like darkness falling after a flash of light, she realized that Maggot was taunting them back, reminding them that he'd been all sorts of places they never had. For the first time it occurred to her that he was already smarter than she was — if you counted backward from eleven, take away four, that was seven. Less than eight. He was at least five or six years old, big enough to live on his own. She'd done everything she could, taught him how to find carrion and other food, how to dig and climb, and all about the history and customs of her people. He sucked all of it in like a lake drinking up a river. But the one thing she couldn't do was make him grow any bigger, any faster.

Reaching up, she took hold of Maggot and swung him down to the ground. "Go on then," she said, picking up his people-skin as it fell.

"Thanks, Mom!" His face beamed at her like the Moon, so bright she almost had to shield her eyes, and then he took off running beside the girls as fast as his little legs could carry him. He looked funny moving upright on his two feet and swinging his arms even though they didn't touch the ground. The girls slowed down a bit to match his pace.

"He's a freak," hissed her mother, slipping up beside her. "An animal."

Windy's gaze never strayed from him. "Whatever you want to call him, he's still my son."

They trotted steadily downhill for several miles along a trail that offered glimpses of the river valley far below and a constant view of the mountains in the distant west. They were almost done when Maggot ran up and tugged at her hand. "Mom, I'm tired."

"Here, I'll carry you." She held out her arm and he tugged on it again, but didn't climb up. If he was too tired to climb, then he *was* exhausted. She lifted him and draped him over her shoulder. He clung to her neck, twining and locking his hands together.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"To spend the day in caves, at the bottom of these cliffs."

"What cl — "

The word dropped off in midair as they came to the top of a steep wall of rock nine hundred feet high.

"Wow." He said that last so quietly she felt only the air of it stirring against her neck.

A trail wound back and forth down the cliff's face. The older trolls descended quickly, digging their toes and fingers in the rock for vertical shortcuts in the places where the rock allowed. Those who left the blueberry patches earliest were already at the bottom when Windy began her climb, pressed against the wall of stone. "Hold on tight," she told Maggot.

He smacked his lips for yes, rubbing his forehead against the back of her neck as he squeezed tight.

She took the easiest path down this wall sacred to the trolls. The story her mother told was that the trolls were born underground, of the Earth

itself, in the deep caves when all the world was covered with snow, living in the water and eating the fish and bugs that swam there. Most believed that the caves at the bottom of this cliff were the ones that trolls emerged from, like infants from their mother's womb, when they came out into the wider world.

Windy wondered about the story as she made her way down the trail. It was too dry a place to live and few things swam in the cavern waters. The redwall and the mountains beyond it held back the clouds in the sky so that almost no rain fell here. But it was still a safe place: the caverns stretched back for miles beneath the mountains, so deep that no people or other predators could ever find them there. All the things that trolls had ever stolen from people were stored there, in hordes cached in such odd corners that some of them had not been counted in a span of lifetimes.

"Hey, Mom," said Maggot.

"Yes?"

"Hey, Mom."

"Yes?"

"Hey, Mom, look at that."

"Look at what?" asked Windy, face against the stone, as her feet reached out to find the next toehold.

"The girls're daring me to join them. Can I?"

She twisted her head around to see them. The girls were showing off, getting back at him for his adventures by climbing straight down the wall. Every young troll did that at least once, usually about the time they were as big as the girls. But Maggot was not every young troll. "No," Windy said firmly. "You can't do that."

"Aw, Mom," he said, but he didn't budge.

"You're a good boy."

"I'm not a boy. I'm almost old enough to be a grownup, even though I'm as small as a baby. That's why Grandma wants to me to die and all the other grown-ups want me to go away."

Something as big as a rock caught in her throat. "What do you think about that?"

"I tell them you won't let anything hurt me." He nuzzled his face against her. "'Cause you don't."

The burden on her shoulders grew heavier as she continued her

downward trek. The air around her changed, charged with the tingling feel of daybreak. When she reached the bottom of the slope, she looked up and saw the Sun shining high on the very top of the cliff face. The wall had lost the blue-gray tones of night and turned into startling shades of red and orange, streaked with white near the very top. It glowed like fire.

Then she noticed the two girls. They'd also seen the light, before she did, and they'd frozen in a spot some fifty or sixty feet up the wall, one above the other.

"Come on down!" she yelled at them. "Hurry!"

"I can't!" cried one. The other just cried.

Their mothers had noticed them missing also and paused on the trail down to the caves. Blossom's mother, Laurel, shouted to the other trolls, calling for help. Windy didn't know her too well, but she'd been friends as a child with Rocky's mother, Bones. Bones ran to Windy's side and called up at the girls. "Come on down! The mouth of day is chasing you!"

And indeed it was. The Sun trickled down the face of the rock and the night at the bottom grew thin, an insufficient darkness. Windy paced nervously.

Bones tried to scale the cliff but the lower reaches were climbed over. The rocks were loose and dusty, and the slope of debris more difficult to climb than the bare rock farther up. It couldn't support the weight of a full-grown troll. She was no more than twenty feet up when the rock gave way underneath her and she slid down in a shower of gravel and stone.

"Don't look up!" Windy yelled to the girls, but it was hopeless. Their eyes were fixed on the sky as the teeth of the Sun closed already over all the uneven upper reaches of rock. Her heart pounded rapidly with worry, but when she turned to the other trolls she found them arguing.

"Someone needs to go up the trail and climb out across to them," said one of older males, a big troll named Stump.

"And get caught in the Sun?" someone answered. "Not likely!"

"Leave 'em there," offered someone else. "They'll come down before the Sun reaches them."

"What if they don't?" asked Blossom's mother, Laurel.

"Let them jump," said Ragweed. He'd been blunting his compassion on Maggot for years.

"We can't leave them." Windy's mother's deep voice overpowered the others. "Those girls are important to the band."

"Let's vote," said Stump.

"Fine! All those in favor of trying to rescue...."

By the time they decided as a group to get something done, it'd be too late. Windy knew they'd have to act now but she didn't know what to do.

Maggot stirred on her shoulder. "What's wrong, Mom?"

"The girls are caught up there. If the sunlight reaches them, they'll fall asleep and drop. Even if they could hold on, the Sun would shrivel them up."

Rocky's mother ripped away huge chunks of friant rock in a frantic effort to carve footholds in the stone. Windy stood below her. "If the girls fall," she promised, "I'll catch them. I'm right here with you."

"Thank you," Bones said. Her feet slipped before she'd climbed twice her height.

Windy braced and caught her. The impact knocked her backward and she felt Maggot's weight slip from her shoulder and roll free. That was something they'd practiced. If she ever fell on him, he'd be crushed. She extricated herself from Bones and looked around to make sure that he was all right. When she didn't see him, she started turning over rocks. "Maggot! Where are you?"

"He's up there."

Windy lifted her head and saw him halfway to the girls, spidering up the cliff. The skin wrapped around his neck gave him that hairy appearance. She jumped after him but Bones grabbed her. "Don't! You can't make it. You'll fall."

"But he doesn't know how to climb a wall that high!"

"Could fool me."

Windy held her breath. Maggot reached a tough spot and crossed horizontally until he found another handhold above him. He did everything just like she trained him, keeping three feet on the wall at all times. If anything happened to him....

Along the trail to the cave, the other trolls finally voted to rescue the girls, with her mother leading the vote. But no one volunteered to go get them except Stump, and her mother thought Stump was too heavy and wanted someone else to make the climb. So now they were proceeding to another vote.

Windy shook her head and looked helplessly above her as Maggot

overtook Blossom and began talking to her. He put his hand over her face and it was enough to break the Sun spell. She resumed her journey down, keeping her eyes on the ground the whole time.

Bones caught her off the wall and hugged her. "I was so scared!" Blossom said, tears pouring down her face, and then she squirmed away from them to go find her mother.

Higher up on the cliff, Rocky wouldn't budge. Maggot talked to her, Windy could see that much. He pointed down but Rocky refused to turn her head. He tried to cover her eyes and she shook her head free.

"She'll come down any moment now," Windy said soothingly, eyeing the slow advance of sunlight down the stone. Most of the trolls had headed off for the caverns without waiting to see if the other girl could be saved.

Bones chewed on her knuckles. "She's so timid, so much more timid. I don't know if she'll make it."

Windy's mother and Stump joined them at the base of the wall. Stump paused briefly to look up at the two motionless figures. "Looks like I still have two to rescue after all. I better hurry."

He headed up an older trail — a dead end that Windy had forgotten — that would take him near their position. Windy watched him make his way up, wishing she'd thought to try that way herself, when she heard her friend gasp. She craned her neck around just in time to see Maggot slip. She screamed, but he pressed himself flat and found another foothold some ten feet farther down. "What happened?"

Bones covered her mouth. "She hit him."

"Of course she did," said Windy's mother. "The stupid boy threw that nasty skin over her face!"

Windy noticed her mother's choice of the word *boy*, but didn't comment. "Come down!" she cried up at her son. "Come down now!"

He ignored her and inched his way back up the rock. Stump was at the proper height on the trail, but he had a hundred foot horizontal climb to reach them. As he began his slow way across, Maggot started yanking on Rocky's feet.

"He's going to pull her down," gasped the girl's mother. "Stop! Stop! Wait for Stump!"

"I don't think that's what he's doing," whispered Windy, not quite

sure herself what he did attempt. Although the skin covered her eyes, Rocky still wouldn't move.

"Hold on!" shouted Stump. "I'm almost there!"

But he wasn't close at all, having reached a spot where his toes could find no hold. Windy's mother tugged at her arm. The whole eastern sky glowed orange above the rim of the mountains. "Come!" she said, her voice as hard as granite. "We saved one girl and we must go down to the caverns. At once!"

"Wait," implored Windy.

The deep shadows of the canyon barely shaded them and she too felt the compelling need to run, but then Maggot's plan worked. He took Rocky's foot and put it in a lower toehold for her. She shifted her weight down to it and the spell was broken.

Slowly at first, then more quickly, they came climbing, sliding down the rock face. Stump called encouragement on his own speedy descent to the trail. The children were halfway down when a peregrine falcon, flying out of the Sun, dived at them curiously. With the day fear on her, Windy expected them to be dislodged by the plummeting bird but they didn't even notice it before it veered away.

"Come on, you're almost here," called Bones.

Rocky pulled the skin off her face, letting it flutter to the ground as she scampered down the last part of the slope and into her mother's arms. Bones swung her daughter up on her back, and hurried off with Windy's mother down the trail for the caves. Windy backed away, under the trees between the cliff and river where night still lingered. "Keep coming, Maggot! I'm right here for you!"

His little spider arms and legs trembled as he moved cautiously from hold to hold. Stump slowed in his dash down the trail. "Your son's a good troll," he said as he passed Windy.

"Thanks," she answered, looking up at the frail little figure clinging two dozen feet up the wall. He fell.

She lunged forward to catch him, cradling him in her arms and hugging him tight to still his shaking. The skin on his chest and under his arms and on his thighs was scraped raw. His fingers and his toes were bleeding, and his teeth chattered. She picked up his skin and covered him as she hurried toward the refuge of darkness.

"We saved them, didn't we?" he said proudly.

"Yes we did," she whispered, in the voice that was just for him. "You're a good troll."

"I'm the best troll. Even Stump's not as good as me."

Her mother waited for them, frowning, just inside the cave. The gray old troll took one look at them and yawned. "I suppose it's too late today to call for any votes. Let's wait and see what sunset brings."

Windy smacked her lips in agreement.

"But you let go of Ragweed. He mates with someone else."

Windy lifted her head, smacking her lips again, relieved. When her mother snorted and moved off into the deeper dark, she rocked Maggot in her arms. "I'm never going to let go of you again, you hear me?" she whispered.

He laughed at her and struggled to get loose.

THE ROAR OF the waterfall filled Windy's ears even though she was still too far away to see it. She paused in the bluish night, scratched her broad nose, and breathed in the faint, distant mist. The tang of spruce and hemlock needles mixed with dozens of smaller, nearer fragrances but she didn't smell the single scent she sought. Somewhere along the way she'd lost track of Maggot.

He'd been gone two whole nights. True, he was old enough to take care of himself now, but she fretted when he disappeared in the daylight. She wanted to stop him and knew that she couldn't.

She continued on toward the Blackwater Falls, her back and shoulders aching. It didn't help that she'd searched for him so long yesternight, she'd been forced to dig under the roots of a windblown tree at dayrise. A whole day sleeping hunched up like that was enough to make any troll sore. Her stomach growled as she walked, reminding her that all she'd eaten in more than a night were the few mouthfuls of mushrooms she sniffed out among the decaying roots.

It had been a hard season, with a late frost that killed off most of the blossoms followed by a dry summer that withered up the surviving fruit. For the past few years there'd been fewer animals coming through the high passes and precious little carrion. The dyrewolves and lions and great

birds all fought over the scraps, so the only way a troll got a decent bit of meat was to stumble on it first. She'd said as much to Maggot, and he told her he had an idea and would catch up with her. Now he'd been gone for two whole nights. If his plan was stealing something from the wolves, he'd end up carrion himself.

She sniffed the air again.

He had promised to meet her at the falls. Maybe he waited for her there, his scent lost in the mist. She hurried on, passing through a grove of cherry trees that had given up their fruit — what little there was — months ago, in the spring. It was still enough to make her mouth water. There were maples beyond them, the leaves turned crisp with the fall. She found one sprayed with an unfamiliar odor and paused to lick at the stain. It didn't taste fresh, but it wasn't that old either. In either case, it meant some young male troll marking his territory, eager to prove himself. One more danger for Maggot.

If Frosty's band was around here, then courtesy required her to let them know that she was coming. Windy reared up and pounded out a greeting high on her chest, a sound so deep it made the air tremble a mile or more away. *Bum-ba-da-dum-dum*. "A stranger, but a friend," the rhythm said to those who listened.

Not wholly a stranger, in truth, since she and Maggot had passed this way before. But not part of the band either.

Not part of any band.

For too many years, she and Maggot had been rootless, blown about from place to place like leaves in a storm. But she wouldn't have it any other way if it meant losing her son.

She repeated the greeting and sat down. While she waited for an answer, she picked through the long grasses and fallen leaves looking for something to eat. She found nothing and heard no answer so she continued on her way. With all the thunder from the waterfalls, she doubted anyone heard her.

The gibbous Moon sat at zenith, flooding the landscape with pale, colorless light. Not a good night to be out. The panic it caused her was subsumed by her worry for Maggot and the hunger in her belly. The thick canopy of the trees soothed her, but when she reached the rocky, open area around the falls, the light hurt her eyes even if it didn't blind her.

The water dropped sixty feet, half in a single sudden plunge. Flowers of spray blossomed off the dark black rocks. Halfway down the falls, a triangular ledge jutted out at an angle, broad on the left end and blending into the straight drop on the right. The music of the water changed as it poured over this surface to crash among the jumbled boulders.

Unappetizing ferns and vines covered the hillside below the tall spruce trees and hemlocks she'd smelled earlier. Mist hung in the air, moistening her dry, cracked skin. Despite the danger of the moonlight and the trolls she hadn't yet seen, Windy ventured right down to the pool and waded out into the cave-cold water under the falls. It eased her aches and took the edge off her torpor. She bent down out among the slick, dark rocks and drank until she didn't feel thirsty.

She noticed a sluggish silver flash deep in the water. Fish. She stepped slowly over to where she saw them, dangling her hand open-palmed with one finger bent, flicking the pink-nailed tip slowly back and forth like a hapless worm.

A large, juicy trout swam almost within her reach, then zipped away. She concentrated on the movement of her finger, hardly daring to breathe as she tried to tempt the fish back again. It slid in for a second look, gliding into reach of her palm, when something splashed in the water beside her and scared it off. She looked up and saw a group of trolls gathered in the meadow beside the pond. Several had stones in their hands.

She waved to them and climbed out of the water. She counted eleven — four adult females, and three adult males, plus two little ones that made her smile. Another male and female appeared to be about twelve winters old, the same age as Maggot. Ready to mate. The oldest female was Frosty, who'd been First of the band for as long as Windy could remember. She also recognized Big Thunder and his son, Little Thunder. The young male was probably Little Thunder's boy, Fart. Although they had started calling him Stinker the last time she and Maggot visited. She didn't remember the girl's name.

"Forgive me for hunting in your pool," she said to Frosty, shouting above the din of falling water. "I didn't see anyone."

"S'all right," she shouted back, looking over Windy's shoulder into the woods. "You still keep that animal around?"

There was no rancor in her voice, so Windy tried to keep it out of her response. "He's my son."

"He was one ugly little monster."

Windy didn't hide the anger in her voice this time. "Not to me."

Most of the others wandered off, turning over logs and rocks as they searched for food. Frosty shrugged, scratched herself, and waddled down to the edge of the pool. "Heard he's traveling by daylight now. Can he really do that?"

"Yes."

The old troll made a strange, noncommittal shape with her mouth. "Well, it's good to see you anyway. Your smell is welcome."

"I like the way you smell also," Windy replied, though it wasn't strictly true — Frosty had a mossy scent, and there was something growing in the cracks of her skin. Windy wondered where the trollbirds were who plucked out such things. "Where's the rest of your band?"

"This is all of us."

She wouldn't have believed it, except she'd seen other bands dwindle just as fast. "What happened to them?"

"Accidents. Two males caught out in daylight. And then people, blackhairs, are moving through the mountains, heading east. They kill the game as they go, and sometimes kill us, though we chase them away. After they came through last year, we caught the coughing sickness. Ten of us died. Are you looking for a husband?"

"No."

"Because we have no unmarried males. But, ah, if you were willing to share a husband...."

Windy didn't grab at that fish. "No, I'm not interested."

"Ah, well. We have two children here now, that's more than we've had in many years. It may be getting better soon."

"I hope so —"

"If she's not here to mate," blurted another female lurking behind them, Little Thunder's sister, Rose, "then make her go away! There's not enough food as it is."

Rose wanted to be First, that was obvious. Windy stayed silent.

"I don't see her taking food out of your mouth," said Frosty.

Rose slapped her hands on her chest in the mildest form of challenge. "She's not one of us. She doesn't belong here."

"We'll take a vote then."

Windy had become accustomed to this ritual. It followed her and Maggot around like a buzzard. She was smacking her lips in acceptance when a flat, familiar drumming sound broke the rhythm of the falls. She turned and saw Maggot striding out of the trees, standing straight despite all her efforts to get him to stoop in a better posture. But her heart leapt up in joy at the sight of him. He was safe. That was all that mattered.

Rose laughed out loud at the sight of him. "He *is* ugly," she said to Frosty. "And a runt."

He was very small for his twelve winters, not even six feet tall, although getting close to it. She hoped he wasn't fully grown, though she feared he might be. Most trolls reached their full height by his age. He was undersized in other ways too, all viney muscle with no belly on him at all, and legs so long and slender they looked deformed. His arms couldn't even reach the ground when he bent over, not unless he crouched. His skin was pale and smooth too, so thin it broke at every quick abrasion. And his bristly black hair had grown long and horribly shiny. It hung down his back with ragged ends where she'd chewed it off.

But ugly?

Never. Not in her eyes.

Stinker, the young male, loped over toward him, bared his teeth, and pounded his chest in warning rather than greeting. It must have been Stinker's spray she smelled. Maggot didn't back down, and though the sound of his little fists on his scrawny chest was as feeble in comparison as the teeth he also flashed in response, something about him made Stinker stop.

"Hey, Fart," Maggot said. "Good to smell you again."

"Hey." The troll's brow ridge rolled down. "You still stink like milk."

Which was an insult. Windy hurried to her son's side, ready to intervene. "These are our friends, Maggot."

He smiled, a broad and genuine expression that contrasted sharply with the purple moons of sleeplessness puddled beneath his eyes. "Oh, good! I've been trying to catch up with you. I have a surprise."

And then without another word of proper greeting, he sprinted back into the forest. A rock flew through the air behind him — hurled by Rose — but it fell well short. He returned a few moments later dragging a buck deer, one of the rare and furtive white-tails with six points on its antlers.

It was lashed with lengths of vine to a pair of long poles. She didn't know where he'd learned such things. A troll never thought of new things like that.

The other members of the band came running. The animal was a couple nights old and Maggot had obviously done much to conceal its scent from scavengers. It smelled of mud, and urine, and stinkweed, but underneath all those things, it smelled wonderful.

"Carrion?" asked Little Thunder.

"No," said Maggot, standing upright and staring eye to eye with the comfortably squatting male. She had the sudden realization that he stayed in his aggressive posture all the time simply to be as big as the non-aggressive trolls. "I hunted it and killed it."

Little Thunder hooted in derision. "How? With your fearsome teeth?" He bared his own and everyone laughed.

Everyone except Windy. And Maggot. He bent down and took something from beside the deer. "With these teeth," he said, and showed off the sharpened sticks he'd played with lately.

Little Thunder flashed his teeth again, rising up on his hind legs to his full eight feet of height, and then retreated. Some of the others banded warnings on their chests.

People used sharp sticks like that to hurt trolls, which was why trolls stole them and hid them deep in caves where people would never find them.

"These are our friends," Windy repeated.

"Then let them eat," said Maggot. He smiled at her again.

Hunger won out over any lecture she intended to give. She reached down to snap off the vines that bound the deer to the poles. In its side, she noticed the broken-off point of one of Maggot's sticks. He had to get close to the horns to do that, and she looked over him quickly for signs of new wounds. He'd suffered a lot of injuries in his twelve years. But he appeared fine. The other trolls still held back, although she could almost hear their stomachs rumbling.

"What will you eat?" she asked. They had learned long ago that carrion made Maggot ill. He had to eat meat fresh, soon after it was dead, or not eat it at all. He had so many weaknesses, and struggled so hard to overcome them.

"I've eaten," was all he said. She doubted it. He'd never put on the weight he needed or grown the way he should. She opened her mouth to say so, and saw him smiling at her, as if he knew exactly what was coming next. "I killed a striped-tail the same evening, and ate it myself."

Aha, she thought. Trying something small first, then something bigger. Very typical of him. And not waiting long before the second venture either. Also typical.

The other trolls jostled for position, pushing the smaller ones back while they waited for her to take first piece. Windy chomped down on the rear flank, severing the hip joint with her massive jaw, ripping the flesh with her nails, and pulled away a whole leg. The others crowded in as soon as she stepped away, jumping back only when the gas-swollen belly popped. The two children licked those parts up off the ground, while every other part of the animal disappeared within moments. Some of the trolls took more than others while a few had none at all, and those looked to steal any loose scraps.

The meat tasted sweet. Windy gobbled it up quickly, shoving moist chunks of it into her massive cheeks.

Maggot circulated among the trolls. They curled their shoulders against him, ready to run away. They didn't know, as she did, that he wouldn't steal their food because he couldn't stomach it. When he came close to Stinker, the troll rose up and growled at him. Maggot dodged behind him and scampered away. She thought she'd seen one of the sharp sticks in his hand, but when she glimpsed him again, the wooden tooth was gone.

A few seconds later, in between the sounds of meat being ripped off bones, she heard a pop followed by a howl of pain.

Stinker danced around and around, waving his arms and slapping at his behind. As he spun away from Windy, she saw the stick poking out of his bottom. Maggot must have propped it under Stinker, where the slow constant pressure punctured his thick skin.

She couldn't help herself. She started to laugh and so did most of the others. When Stinker dropped the other haunch — that was the piece he ripped free — to grab at the stick with both hands, Maggot rushed in. He scooped up the meat and hurried away to the young female, who sat there with nothing to eat.

It was a courtship gift, all very proper. And, coming from Maggot, not proper at all. Windy's laughter died in her throat.

Frosty frowned in open disapproval. It was a glare so very like Windy's mother it made her feel at home, even though her mother had died during the past winter. The young female appeared stunned, but she made the proper gargling sound in response, grabbed the meat, and ran away to eat it.

Stinker hopped over to Frosty and asked her to remove the splinter. She did, and as soon as it came out, he grabbed some of the ribs from her pile of bones and scooted off. Soon bones crunched by thick teeth and the sucking out of marrow were the only sound in the woods besides the waterfall.

Windy sniffed the air. The mood was mixed. The trolls were glad for the scraps of meat, but Maggot made them nervous. He made her nervous too when he went over and flirted with the girl.

He whispered to her first, drew a laugh, and that wasn't so bad. Then they rubbed faces together, and she bent over abruptly, presenting her sex to him. It was neither swollen nor properly red, and she continued to eat and look around while she did it. Windy suspected that the girl was only trying to make Stinker jealous. But Maggot sniffed at it, stood up, and waved his sex at her face to show he was interested. When he rubbed up against her, the adults were caught between horror and humor. But since neither Maggot or the girl gave off the proper musk, and since the girl was so much larger than he was, they treated it like an uncomfortable joke.

Windy sighed miserably.

She'd always hoped that Maggot would find a nice girl to mate with and settle down. She didn't care for grandchildren so much, but his happiness mattered to her. She knew that she and Ragweed were happy, even if it was only for a short time. She wanted that for her son.

So Maggot's earnestness worried her. However much the other trolls considered the pantomime a joke, Windy knew that he was serious about mating with the girl. The girl noticed it too, at about the same moment, because she squealed and jumped away. When Maggot stood there confused, Stinker growled and charged, shoving him to the ground.

"Wrestle him!" shouted Little Thunder.

The others in the little band took up the chant at once. "Wrestle, wrestle!"

Stinker's face wrinkled happily at the suggestion. He reared up on his hind legs, almost eight feet tall and over two hundred fifty pounds, battering his chest with the danger-death warning. "I challenge you!"

Maggot sat on the ground. He looked at Windy, his eyes cold and certain. There were times when she wished he were not so completely fearless or that he would not take risks if she refused them. But what could she do?

She smacked her lips: yes.

He stood up — two feet and a hundred pounds shy of Stinker's size — pounding death on his chest, using cupped hands instead of knuckles to make a sharper, cracking sound in place of the deep resonant bass.

The adults formed a rough circle around the edge of the glade. Or, rather, a half circle spread out behind Stinker. Windy sat alone in the other half of the circle. The girl hovered on the edge between the two, knuckle-walking toward Windy then back again toward her band.

"You're a baby bird in a nest," Maggot said, snapping his fingers. "I'm going to crush you like that!"

"You're a worm!" screamed Stinker. "And I'm going to squish you like a, uh, like a, like a worm!"

Maggot fell forward to stand on his hands, and waved his foot at Stinker's face. "You're a snake in the grass — I'm going to break your skinny little snake-neck between my toes."

Some of the other trolls laughed at this. It was a good trick, something none of them could do. Besides, the insults were a big part of the fun of wrestling and Maggot was good at them. Telling a troll he had a neck was like telling a twelve-year-old he smelled like milk.

Stinker was not so good at insults. He grabbed at Maggot's foot like a fish going for a fingernail. Maggot flipped backward and landed upright. Stinker rushed him, but Frosty thrust her long arms between them.

"Are you done talking already?" she asked.

"Just let me at him!" said Stinker.

Frosty looked to Maggot, who bounced up and down a little nervously. He lifted his chin. "Just have him bend over, so I can fart in his ear to see if he knows his name."

"Let me at him!"

"Not until I say ready," she commanded. "Do you both agree to this?"

They did.

"Does anyone vote against it?" She looked at Windy.

Windy refused to raise her hand. Sooner or later, Maggot had to learn what was going to happen to him if he picked fights with other males over a girl.

"Let them wrestle already," hollered Big Thunder.

Frosty turned back to the boys. "There's to be no eye poking, or nose gouging, and no killing, but everything else is fair. Do you both agree to that?"

"What if I smash him by accident?" asked Stinker. "What if I fall on him? He'll squish like a berry."

"What if I rip his head off," Maggot spat back. "What if I rip his head off and drink his brains out of his skull? Not that he has any."

"No killing!" Frosty told Stinker. "You'll fight until I say stop." She stepped back with her arm outstretched, dropped it suddenly, and cried, "Go!"

The first exchange happened quickly. Stinker charged with his arms upraised to strike; Maggot dropped to the ground and kicked Stinker's ankles out from under him. As Stinker crashed into the dirt, Maggot attempted to leap past him for the poles he carried the deer carcass in on — going for his sharpened sticks, Windy realized — but Stinker lurched to his feet and thrust his hand out wildly. Maggot smacked into the giant forearm and flopped on his back with a sharp cry of pain.

Stinker took a running leap high into the air so he could crush Maggot. Windy gasped aloud, but her son rolled out of the way and Stinker slammed hard into the ground. Maggot came up with a handful of dirt and flung it into Stinker's face.

When Maggot made another dash for his sticks, Little Thunder moved to intercept him. The delay allowed Stinker, howling and blind, to lurch after Maggot's scent. His flailing hand caught her son's ankle and tripped him. Maggot fell down and Stinker fell on top.

Her son's pale skin glistened in the bright moonlight as he wriggled half-free. He and Stinker rolled over several times in their struggle. The lopsided little circle of hooting spectators moved with the pair as they tumbled down the slope to the side of the pool below the waterfall. Stinker ended up on top, spit flying out of his mouth as he pounded his hands at

her twisting, dodging son. Windy's fingers kneaded her breast anxiously. Maggot groped in the mud, then smashed his fist into Stinker's nose. She assumed he had picked up a rock as a weapon, but he hadn't. Instead, Maggot shoved a big ball of mud up Stinker's nostrils, choking him. As the troll curled away gagging, Maggot squirmed free.

Or almost free. Stinker grabbed Maggot's foot with one hand while the other clawed at his clogged nose. Maggot whipped around and she heard a snap followed by a howl of pain — he broke Stinker's finger to break his grip.

"Run," she whispered, hoping he would hear her. "Run, run far away, run fast, and I'll come find you when it's safe."

But he didn't run. He pounced on Stinker's back, slipping his arm under the troll's and pressing his forearm down on the back of Stinker's neck. Windy's eyes went wide. This was a practical joke that Maggot played on her often, holding her arm out of the way so he could tickle her.

"Run," she pleaded.

Then Maggot did the same with his other arm, something he'd never done to her. Stinker spun in a circle, unable to reach Maggot, who perched on his back like a trollbird.

"Rip the maggot's head off!" screamed Little Thunder, and the other trolls screamed with him, slapping their hands on the ground. The uproar made Windy tremble.

"Bite him!" cried Rose. "Bite him really hard!"

"Fall on him!" yelled Big Thunder.

The last suggestion made the most sense, and someone had just suggested that they vote on it when Stinker took the initiative into his own hands — or rather legs, as his hands flapped uselessly over his head — and flopped backward. Windy plunged her fingers into the loam and groped for bedrock to root herself to. She wanted to run to Maggot's aid, but knew she could not. Not yet. But as soon as the two hit the ground, she would rush in....

They did not hit the ground.

Maggot had anticipated Stinker's move. As the troll fell back, Maggot kicked his legs out and landed upright. With his feet planted firmly, he bent Stinker's chin into his chest. Then, with a heart-wrenching cry, he folded the troll over double.

Stinker's skin turned a darker shade of gray. He couldn't breathe. The veins stood out on Maggot's head, like ridges in the moonlight. Windy held her place. All fell silent except for the rush of the waterfall as they watched her son strain his long legs to snap Stinker in half and grind him into the dirt.

Surely, Windy thought, looking at her son, *his heart will burst*. If his didn't, hers would.

That's when the girl shrieked and rushed forward. She leapt on Maggot's back, slapping and clawing him. "You beast! You, you *animal*!"

Maggot let go instantly and fled across the glade for one of the trees. He dashed in among the branches and climbed above the height of the trolls. "Hey, Fart," he taunted, between loud, ragged breaths. "Your mama had to run and save you!"

It was all the more effective as an insult because Windy sat there and did nothing. The other trolls howled with laughter, even Little Thunder, as the girl cradled a sulking, weary Stinker in her arms.

"Look at Mama Troll with her baby!"

"Better clean his nose, Mama, it's a mess!"

Windy let go of the dirt, brushed it off her fingers, and relaxed. They'd ridicule Stinker for years for losing a wrestling match to her boy.

Frosty lumbered over and sat down beside Windy. Neither one said a word. Then Frosty reached out and started grooming her, picking off loose scales of skin and crawling bugs. Windy sighed in contentment.

"That was good fun," said Frosty, crunching a big tick between her molars. "Your son, he fights like a troll."

"He's a good troll," Windy said.

Little Thunder overheard and grunted his approval. "He brought us some fresh rotten meat. That was good. You and your son, you can come visit our band any time you want."

"Visit, but not stay," said Frosty firmly. "We can take a vote, and you and he can argue otherwise, if you insist. But I won't support it."

Windy didn't insist. She'd heard the same thing many times before, from the Sulphur Springs down south to Deep Hole Gorge in the east. "We're just glad for your hospitality. Maybe I could come to your den to sleep for the day and tomorrow night I can tell you what I've seen in the seven bands."

"That smells good. And your son? Where will he spend the day?"

Even Frosty knew that it would not be safe for Maggot to stay there, not until Stinker got over his anger. "He can take care of himself," she said loudly. "He's a grown troll."

She glanced over. Maggot smacked his lips at her, and descended from the tree. His skin looked like dropped fruit in the moonlight, covered with dark bruises and deep cuts. As he ran off into the woods, she worried less than she had only two nights before. He'd proven that he could take care of himself. She was proud of him, prouder than ever.

So why did she feel so sad?

THE AIR OUTSIDE the cave blew wonderfully cold in the mercifully short daylight. In the summertime, cool air inside the cave refreshed her; now it felt warm compared to the winter wind, almost enough to make her feel sluggish. Windy longed to run out and roll in the snow to wake up, but the last wings of daylight still feathered the cave's entrance.

Some of the other trolls walked up from the deeper recesses of the caverns, rubbing their eyes. "Is he back yet?"

Windy opened her mouth and thrust out her tongue.

The trolls frowned, but not much. One of them chewed on a big-eared bat that had fallen from its perch high up in the cave. Sometimes the trolls threw stones at the bats to knock them down. Thousands hung upside down on the tall ceilings of the caverns, night creatures like the trolls and hard to catch in the summer when they flitted around too fast for the eye to follow. They seemed to sleep all winter long and were easy to capture. One in the mouth melted away to nothing like snow. A whole pile of them didn't add up to a decent meal though it was something crunchy to snack on.

Windy sighed. Winter was the best time of year for a troll. It was easier for her to stay active in the cold, and the nights were so long that there was enough time to eat and play. Best of all, it was the season of meat: weaker animals succumbed to the harsh temperatures and foundered in the deep drifts, leaving plenty of carrion for the trolls. She scratched the back of her neck, then her elbow. Scales of gray skin floated through the air like snow. That was the only problem — their thick skin dried up and came off in big flakes that left the skin beneath pink and raw.

She thought of Maggot's thin skin, no longer so white, scorched brown by the Sun, rubbed raw by the wind, with so little fat beneath it she wondered how he stayed warm at all. In comparison, her own itchiness didn't seem like such a big problem.

The last trolls straggled up from their day's sleep. There were no children in this band — the last had been killed by a cave bear during the summer — and none of the females were pregnant. Yet these seventeen individuals constituted the largest remaining band of trolls in all the eastern mountains. Windy knew of nine at Blackwater Falls, and seven each in the bands at Deep River Gorge and Sulphur Springs. There were some farther north in the Black Rock country, some said, or toward the Big Deep Water. The Piebald Mountain remnant from way down south had moved north a few winters before, looking for a place without people. It was believed that there were many far to the West in the mountains beyond the sunset, but no one living had ever seen them.

A shadow fell across the cave's entrance. As the trolls surged toward the promise of darkness, a thin, almost skeletal figure entered.

One of the girls gasped. "What an ugly troll!"

"He's beautiful!" snapped Windy. The girls dissolved in giggles, and she realized she'd been had.

Maggot was still short, not quite six and a half feet tall, and painfully thin at a little over two hundred pounds, but he had grown as big as could be expected. He was eighteen or nineteen winters old now — Windy had lost count of the years. His pale skin was covered with more scars than she could count or remember. The new and fading marks overlapped each other, from the numerous deep scratches left by the nails of other trolls to two long purple worms across one thigh left by a big-toothed lion he'd killed. Some of them he'd never explained to her, nor had she asked him to.

Ragweed snorted. He was the biggest male in the band, grown round-bellied with age and presumably wise. He stood next to his current mate, a pretty young girl named Cliff, and glared balefully at Maggot. His nose wrinkled and he shouldered his way forward.

Windy sniffed and smelled the same odor, of many people, but no one stood there except her son. "Maggot?"

He stepped out of the light into the dark and she saw him clearly then. He wore something on his feet, not just wrapped animal skins but things

shaped from the forelegs of deer. They had the people scent on them, as did the skin across his shoulders.

"Showing his true odors," said Ragweed, looking over to Windy. "And this is the troll — I use the term loosely — you want to be First?"

Before she could answer, one of the younger trolls called out. "Got any ripe meat, Maggot?"

Her son inclined his head toward the cave entrance. "Part of a humpback."

The other trolls looked expectantly to Windy. She lifted her lips, like someone with her mouth full, to say "go on," and they all shoved past her to pour out of the cave.

"Where did you get those?" She indicated his new skins.

"I scavenged them, how else?" He handed her the old metal knife he'd used for the past three years — something else he'd scavenged. "I replaced this tooth with a new one," he said, showing her the one in his other hand. "You take it."

"Thank you," she said. Her fist enclosed the tooth.

"Keep this one with you," he said.

"This time I will." He'd given her such gifts before, but in truth it wasn't as sharp or as effective as her own claw-like nails. And it was always hard to remember where she left such things when she went outside. If she could hold onto it through the night, she'd take it deep into the cavern when she went to sleep at dayrise. There she'd add it to the piles of similar baubles the trolls had accumulated over tens of lifetimes, counted beyond memory. She gestured to his covering skins. "Why tonight?"

He crinkled his nose, signifying uncertainty. "Because," he said. Then, "I was cold. These were warm."

"But tonight you're supposed to challenge Ragweed for First of the band! You've worked so hard to make the others accept you as one of them. This just reminds them of the differences."

He ran his hands over her skin, as if picking for parasites. There weren't any in this cold. She did the same for him. They sat like that a long while, touching each other without speaking another word.

"I *am* different," he said finally. "If they accept me, it'll be because of who I really am."

She didn't know what to say to that, so she rose. "We should go. The vote will be at midnight."

"I'm ready."

"Aren't you thirsty? Don't you need to go down to the lake inside the cavern and get a drink?"

"No, I'm fine."

They stepped outside. A waning thorn of Moon pricked the horizon. Nothing remained of the humpback except the poles Maggot carried it in on and a few stray bits of fur and bone. A new pole, with a pointed leaf of metal on one end like those stored in the deep caves, lay propped against the stone. Maggot picked it up to carry with him. A tramped-down trail led across the deep snow to the vale, through several miles of forest filled with pine cones and acorns for anyone willing to dig them up.

"Let's cut over the hills to join the others," said Windy. She'd eat something later, when her stomach settled.

"That smells good," said Maggot.

Fluffy flakes of snow swirled in the air. There was no trail to follow this way. Windy's broad flat feet buoyed her up across the deep drifts, and her wide hands helped support her weight. She moved along quickly on all fours. She still expected Maggot, as thin and small as he was, to glide across the surface, but his narrow feet continually broke through the crust of snow. As they crossed the naked ridge, Windy heard wolves howling.

Maggot looked over his shoulder. "I should've brought my snowfeet," he said.

Windy paused for him to catch up. "Are they something else you scavenged, with all the rest of this?"

He smiled at her. "I scavenged the first ones years ago. I've been hiding these things from you, and the others, for years. Mostly caching them in the trees, like carrion."

She didn't know what to say except, "Good. That's smart."

The wolves howled again, much nearer. Windy sniffed the air, but scented nothing upwind. She hoped they were timberwolves — she'd never learned to tell one wolf's howl from another. Dyrewolves could be deadly.

Maggot smiled grimly. "The winter's been long and hard. Much of the meat I've taken for you would've fallen to them."

Windy glimpsed the pack gliding through the distant trees like wisps of brown-gray fog. A canny old female led three, no, four males. Another handful-plus-two trailed behind. Dyrewolves, just as she feared. A pack could easily bring down a single troll or even a pair. It had happened to Bones and her mate a few winters past.

The snow cracked, and Maggot sunk to his knees. Windy went back to help pull him free.

"They're slow," he told her. "They tire quickly. You should run ahead and join the others. You'll be safe."

"I can't do that!"

He stopped in his tracks and turned toward the trees. "I can climb, they can't. Neither can you. Eventually they'll go away."

"I've always stood beside you."

He snorted, troll fashion. "Now's a good time to change your habits."

Before she could run or Maggot could bolt for the trees, the baying dyrewolves bounded across the snow. They almost appeared to be swimming, the way they paddled their paws to stay afloat on this cold white lake.

She shoved her son toward the trees. "Run! Save yourself!"

Maggot laughed and placed his back against hers, his knife in one hand, spear in the other. "It's always been the two of us against the world, huh, Mom?"

A little smile shadowed her mouth. Before it faded away, the dyrewolves closed in, spreading out in a circle. She smelled uncertainty on them, and hunger, but no fear, neither from them nor Maggot. The only fear she smelled was her own.

The wolves scented it too. Two of them dashed in and snapped at her, but stopped short when she bared her own teeth and snarled back.

She'd never been this close to a dyrewolf. Their bodies were stocky, with short, powerful legs. They had thick ruffs around their necks, and fur streaked gray, white, and brown. But it was their massive heads, all out of proportion to the rest of their bodies, that made her most afraid. They had shorter snouts than the timberwolves or wild dogs, with teeth like sharp stones in their bone-crushing jaws, and wild intelligent eyes. They smelled like death.

As the two wolves stopped short of her, three others attacked Maggot.

The old female lunged at him first, but it was a feint. He swung his knife at her in counter-feint, and when the old male made the real attack, Maggot thrust the spear through its neck. Blood gushed out, turning the snow pink. Maggot twisted the spear and pulled it free to jab it at the third beast while the wounded one yelped and crawled away.

The dyrewolves withdrew a short distance. "Let's go," Maggot said. "Down this way, toward the vale."

She smacked her lips in assent, and one of the males dived in to fasten on her arm. "Aiiee!"

Others leapt in at Maggot. She heard him shout as he drove them back, but all she felt was pain as the dyrewolf's teeth sank right through her flesh. She drove her fist down onto the soft snout. The wolf snarled, and its yellow eyes squeezed shut, but it didn't let go, so she pounded again and again as the wolf shook its head dodging the blows, and when that failed to free her arm she thrust one of her long sharp fingers deep into a yellow eye. It popped like a grape under her nail, squirting its warm juice across her hand, so she thrust further into its brain. The dyrewolf shuddered and died but still it didn't let go.

She pried with her fingers until the dead animal's jaws cracked. She stopped screaming as she dropped it to the ground and swiveled around to answer the next attack.

If any of the other wolves had charged in, they could have pulled her down and killed her. She saw now that they hadn't only because Maggot had held them away. His footprints formed a protective circle around her, and he stood poised with his spear raised. Half a dozen animals bled from cuts to their necks and faces.

"Step away from the dead one slowly," said Maggot, his voice as sharp as his weapon.

She did exactly as he told her. They were scarcely out of arm's reach when the dyrewolves surrounded their dead companion, licking at the bloody snow and baying.

"Keep moving, faster now," Maggot said tersely. "If you pack snow on the wound as you go, it'll help"

She noticed the blood pouring down her arm. Something felt wrong with the bone. Numbness stiffened her fingertips. Without slowing down, she scooped up handfuls of snow and packed it as Maggot told her,

clamping her good hand down tight on top of the wound. It eased the burning and staunched the bleeding. She found it difficult to walk on two feet, but she shuffled along until she found and followed the deep trails in the snow made earlier by the other trolls.

She'd never felt so close to her own death before. She trembled from it, and yet, as they left the dyrewolves behind and climbed the low rise between two peaks to descend into the larger valley, it all seemed unreal, something that had already happened in the distant past. She was changed, but she did not know how or why.

"Have you fought them before?" she asked her son. "Alone?"

Maggot smacked his lips once. *Yes, but it was a small meal, nothing.*

Her son was covered by many scars. How had he been changed? She felt faint-headed, apart from herself, as though she floated over the snow.

They entered the sacred glade with its circle marked out by thirteen boulders. The other trolls saw Windy's wound and crowded around to hear how it happened. While she told them about the dyrewolves, Maggot circulated and spoke to Rocky and her mate, and to Blossom, and Scabpicker and all the other trolls whose votes he hoped to win.

"Let's start," shouted Ragweed.

"I'm ready whenever you are," said Maggot. "You want to be First, so you should go first."

Ragweed scowled, unsure if he had just been insulted. Windy sat down as he trotted around inside the circle of stones, trying to impress the other trolls. He was still handsome, she reluctantly admitted to herself. His gray skin looked exceptionally rock-like against the white snow.

"Look!" shouted Maggot, breaking the spell. "He's running in circles! And that's who you want for a leader?"

Ragweed swerved, rushing at Maggot, rising up to his eight and a half feet of height and pounding his chest. Maggot straightened up as tall as he could stand, stretched out his arms as if to pound on his chest. While Ragweed paused for the challenge, Maggot dropped without warning to four legs and ran around the circle. He didn't go more than a quarter of the way before he stopped to scratch his ass. It was a perfect imitation of Ragweed and Windy wasn't the only one to burst out laughing.

Ragweed laughed along with them, until his brow drooped with belated recognition. "Hey!"

Maggot stood up straight again. "Are we here to vote or wrestle? I can't tell by the way you're acting so far."

"That's enough," said Laurel, now the oldest female of the band, and a former First. "Both of you have ideas for what we should do about our problems. Ragweed, maybe you should begin. Tell us why we should vote for you to be First of the band."

Windy shook her head, squeezing fresh snow on her arm to ease the pain. Maggot had ideas for the good of the band — not Ragweed — and he had talked about them often while Berry, the previous First, died of the yellow water. Ragweed opposed everything Maggot said, more out of habit than for any other reason. Somehow they ended up as the two candidates for First.

Ragweed paced, then paused, then squatted and looked each troll in the eyes. "You all know me," he told them. "I was born in this band and I've lived here all my life among you."

How conveniently he'd forgotten their six years of wandering, thought Windy. But he smelled earnest. He'd always had a charismatic fragrance.

"We've faced a lot of problems," Ragweed continued. "Some of you are as old as me. You remember back when we were little trollings there were fifty, sixty trolls in this band. The mountains were ours. We found every bit of carrion, every calf and fawn that went unprotected. Vote for me, and I'll bring those days back. We'll make things like it used to be, when the caves were safe for children and the land was ours to scavenge."

He paced again. "Now, if you don't want to vote for me, you can vote for Maggot. I'd say that he's as ugly as a possum, but that'd insult the possum." Laughter to that. "The worst thing is that he's the size of a trolling, and he still follows his mother around like one, and she covers him up funny."

More laughter at that.

Ragweed glanced over as if expecting Maggot to attack him for these insults, but her son stayed motionless. What was wrong with him? He ought to be roaring his disagreement. She swallowed a handful of snow to wet her parched throat.

"Vote for me," her former husband concluded, "because I'm the real troll. Thank you."

Three or four of his strongest supporters cheered madly, and pounded their chests in challenges directed at Maggot.

Windy sniffed worriedly. To her, Maggot smelled wonderful, unique. But to the others he would smell foreign, not like himself but like a strange band of people because of the things he carried. Seemingly oblivious to this, Maggot bounded over to one of the boulders and climbed on it to make himself taller.

"Vote not with your eyes, but with your bellies," he began and Windy's spine shivered like a reed. Maggot had trained his voice to make it deep and resonant like Ragweed's. "Ask not who looks more like you, but who has done more for you. Ragweed is a handsome troll, and I admit that I am skinny, frail, and small. But you're not looking for a mate, with the beauty of a mate, but for your First, and I have been the first to serve you all. Who brings you more mea — "

He jumped as a ball of dung sailed by the spot where he stood. Cliff and Ragweed's other supporters hooted and waved their bottoms at him. Laurel sprinted over on her knuckles. "We'll have none of that now!"

"No muck-slinging!" shouted old Stump, and it was taken up as a general cry. One more ball of dung was hurled half-heartedly, but no more was needed to ruin the rhythm of Maggot's speech. Windy could cry. It would be a close vote under the best circumstances, but now....

Maggot pointed to her. "Ragweed says that I stand beside my mother and that is true! I'll never deny it. Tonight as I came to this place, dyrewolves attacked my mother — you see the teeth marks on her arms. But I stood by her to protect her and I will also stand by all of yo — "

"Aw, he bit her arm himself," cried Ragweed.

Maggot turned and bared his teeth at him, then mocked his own small mouth. They'd seen her wound, so a few trolls laughed. But inside, Windy cringed. Her son's unimpressive mouth would lose him votes. Trolls voted for big teeth. He was emphasizing all the wrong things!

But Maggot continued. "Ragweed says he's going to give you more food, more fruit. How? People come into the high valleys, eating everything and destroying the caves where we sleep. I've walked across these mountains, from the head up north to the southern tail and I've seen whole bands vanish in the space of a few years. Who last heard word from the Blue Peaks band? Or the Sinking River band? If we don't want to disappear like the others, without a trace, we need a plan."

The trolls looked around, like someone seeking better tasting food.

Windy shifted fretfully. It was the truth! Maggot told the truth, but the trolls didn't want to hear it. He was losing them.

"What is Ragweed's plan?" Maggot asked. "He promises you that everything will be like it was. If he promised to grab the Sun in his fist and move it backward across the sky, would you believe him?"

He'd lost them! Windy groaned aloud, and when the others looked at the noise she grimaced and held her injured arm. But you couldn't mention the Sun before an election, you just couldn't! She thought her son was smarter than that.

"If you elect me First, I will not lead you back but forward. I will take us and join up with the remaining trolls at the Blackwater and the Sulphur Springs. Together, we can make one large band again and there will be mates for everyone and children will be born. I will teach you to make weapons, to hunt down the food we all must have. And I will lead you against the people who trespass — "

"Can we vote now?" asked one of the trolls. Others took up the call. Truthfully, thought Windy, most had probably made up their minds beforehand. Laurel called for the vote. Hope soared in Windy's breast when she counted the hands. Ragweed only got seven votes. Then Laurel called Maggot's name and four arms went up — hers, Rocky's and her mate Skeeter's, and Stump's. The vast majority of trolls had lost interest long before and when the vote was called they wandered away to roll in the snow or dig in it for things to eat. Maggot saw the number of hands up and didn't even vote for himself. Instead he jumped up on one of the boulders, drumming the death tattoo on his chest.

No one paid him any attention.

Laurel declared Ragweed the winner. Three or four of his supporters hollered and cheered. Cliff danced wildly around the circle. Windy rose and went over to thank Rocky and Skeeter.

"If anyone could think past tomorrow's darkness," Rocky said, "they'd know that everything Maggot says is true."

Her husband was the last known survivor of Blue Peaks band. He shaped his lips in agreement. "I'd say we should go elsewhere, but this is still the best band and our best hope."

"These are hard years," Windy told him. "But daylight is always followed again by darkness. Things will get better."

Stump came over, and started to groom her. "How's the arm?"
"It hurts."

"We'll take care of you," he rumbled. "Your son's a fine troll."

"I'm very proud of him."

He exuded a sprit of muskiness, testing the air to see if she'd respond. His interest surprised her. He examined her arm. The worst bleeding had stopped but the numbness reached way down into the bone. "Yep," he told her. "We'll have to keep you fed, take good care of that."

"It'll be fine." She pulled her arm back and hid it behind her. She musked a bit into the air as well. Not because she was really interested — because she wasn't, she was too old for that foolishness and had spent too many years alone with her son. But she didn't want Stump to feel bad. When he started grooming her again, Rocky giggled and Skeeter shushed her. Feeling embarrassed, Windy looked around helplessly for Maggot and saw Ragweed's supporters chasing him away.

"You weren't baiting him again?" she asked when Maggot came and squatted down with them.

"I wanted to wish him good luck," said Maggot. "But he doesn't want it."

Rocky sensed his agitation and picked considerately through his hair. "In the spring," she said, "people will see how bad their decision was. We'll have another vote."

"Perhaps," said Maggot. His face was wistful, sad. He wore a smile that was less his than the skins that covered him. "Listen, I didn't say anything earlier because I was saving it for the feast when I won. If I won. But it's better this way, because there's more for the four of you."

Skeeter licked his lips. "What is it? Another humpback?"

"People," said Maggot plainly. "A small group crossing from the southern pass. I don't know if they got lost, or what, but the blizzard trapped them, made it hard for them to move. I buried the bodies under their stuff and pissed all over it."

Stump grinned from ear to ear. "Where are they? Let's go!"

"Follow the wind, down the rocky river, where it passes between the high rocks. There's a glade of chestnut trees there." He smiled at Stump. "If you can't find the meat, you can always eat the chestnuts."

"There's a deep rock ledge down there, along the river," Rocky added

enthusiastically. "We can spend the day sleeping there and eat again tomorrow night."

The other three stood up and left at once. Windy rose also and black dots swam suddenly before her eyes. When they cleared, she noticed Maggot sitting still. "Come on," she said.

He stuck out his tongue. "Would you ever eat the flesh of another troll?"

"No!" Something was wrong with him, to make him so stupid. Trolls buried their dead away from light, so that they could pass through the hot day of death and enter again into the long sweet night of life.

Maggot came over and sat beside her. "So will I never eat people flesh." He paused, picked at her skin one more time. "I'm people, Mother. I'm not a troll."

"You're a good troll!"

"I've tried hard. You saw that tonight. I'm a better troll than Ragweed in every respect but one. I'm not a troll."

Sharp pain shot all the way up her arm into her chest. "What will you do?"

"Go down to the western valley where I was born. I've studied people for years now as they passed through the mountains. Maybe I can learn to be like them. Maybe find a band that I can join."

Ah, so that's it, she thought. Maybe it's for the best. She took his hand in hers, and walked up out of the stone circle. "We'll go downstream with the others," she told him. "We'll sleep overday under the rock ledge and tomorrow we'll continue on our way."

He tried to pull his hand free; she gripped it as tight as an old root wound round a rock.

"Mom?"

"Yes."

"Mom?"

"Yes."

"Mom, this is something I have to do alone. You need to stay here. This is where you belong."

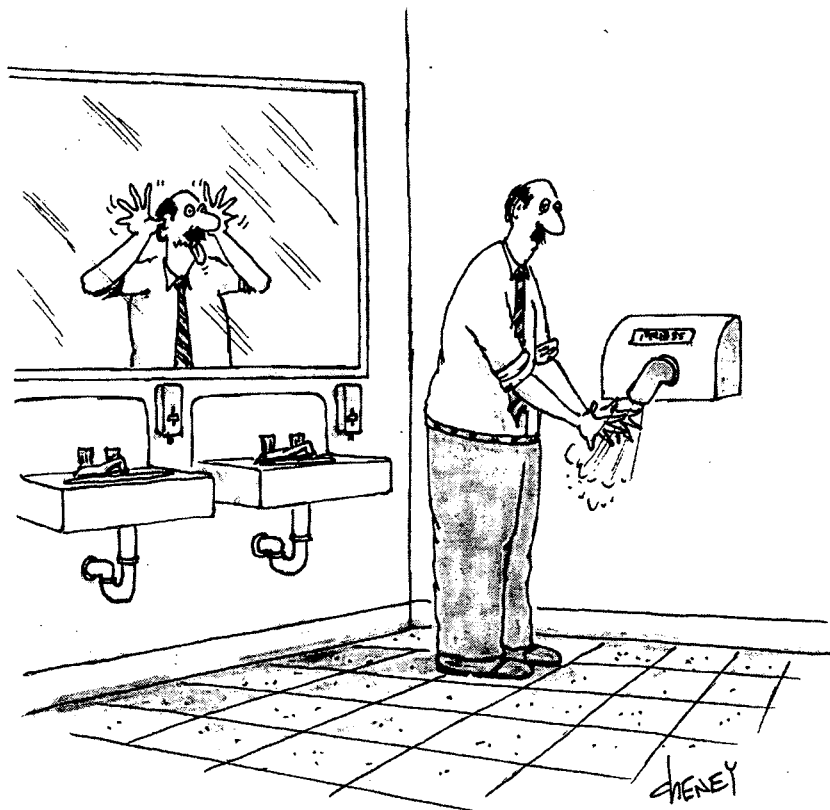
Stump reappeared on the edge of the hill. He spritzed an odor of worry for her. He was very kind. When he saw she was all right, he gave off another musk.

Maggot had never once given off the proper musk, had never once said that he loved her. And yet she knew that he did, that he always would.

"Go with them, Mom," he said softly. "I'll be fine."

He pulled his hand again, very gently. And she did the hardest thing she had ever done in her life.

She let go. ☞





BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

CHARLES DE LINT

The Fall of the Kings by Ellen Kushner and Delia Sherman, Random House, 2002, \$13.95.

SIMPLY PUT, *The Fall of Kings* embraces the age-old struggle between scholars and mystics, by which I mean the attempt to bridge the gulf that separates history from mystery.

The backstory is this: a long time ago, in this world the authors have created, the Southern and Northern Kingdoms joined into one kingdom. In the rocky North, there were kings ruled by wizards and the lives of these kings were tied to the well-being of the land. In the fertile South, there was one king who ruled with a council.

When the two lands joined in their Union, the northern kings became nobles under one king. That king was still ruled by a wizard, but in time the line of kings began to show signs of madness and eventu-

ally the Southern nobles rose up against the monarchy. The wizards were gathered together in a great hall and slain. Also killed was the last mad king and once again nobles ruled the land.

Fast forward to the present and the coming of those Northern kings is still considered history but their wizards and magic, the blood-tie between king and the land, has become legend. No one believes in magic, though curiously, its practice, and even debate about it, is illegal.

Enter Basil St. Cloud, Doctor of History in the great University of the South. As the book opens he is not much different from the other Doctors, though perhaps a touch more eager to seek after Truth. And he's certainly naive.

But fateful events are coming into play around St. Cloud, swallowing his comfortable life of historical studies and near-poverty. He takes a new lover, Lord Theron Champion, and he begins to dream of the old rituals from legend: how the

wizards chose and tested the young kings to pick the one who would rule over the next year. Meanwhile, the North, always restless, is suffering famine, and there are mutterings of revolt. Young Northern students take to wearing carved wooden oak leaves—a symbol from the old wizards—and reenacting garbled versions of the old rituals.

And as all of this swirls around St. Cloud, he begins to believe, not only in the old magic, but that he and his lover have been chosen to return magic by renewing the bonds between king and land. The real question that arises, as much for the reader as for the characters, is: could any of it be true? Who prevails—the scholars or the mystics?

Much of the book is set in the narrow streets and taverns of the University where St. Cloud lives and teaches, or in the houses of the nobility of which his lover Campion is an unhappy member, and the authors bring a playful truth to how they describe each. It's true that there are dark days in the offing, and endless scheming in the houses of the nobility as well as among the students and their Doctors; there are doomed romances and joyful liaisons; but the interactions between the characters echo the works of Dorothy Dunnett,

whose historical romances aren't your usual inspiration for fantasy novels (unless you count the authors' own previous books, especially Ellen Kushner's *Swordspoint* and Delia Sherman's *The Porcelain Dove*). St. Cloud, Campion, and the rest of the cast walk through the pages of this novel with style and wit, larger than life—and full of life.

Considering the splendid talents of Kushner and Sherman when writing under their individual bylines, it's really no surprise that *The Fall of the Kings* is the treat it is. Engaging characters, with their sharp dialogue and complex relationships, the awe and wonder of the ancient beliefs of the Northerners, and the wonderfully realized setting combine here for one of my favorite books of the year.

Outfoxing Coyote, by Carolyn Dunn, That Painted Horse Press, 2001, \$12.95

Paula Gunn Allen, the editor of this American Indian Poet series of which *Outfoxing Coyote* is the first volume, makes a very telling observation in her introduction to Dunn's poetry:

"Every instance," she writes, "of what the Western mind categorizes as 'legend,' 'myth,' 'ritual,' or

'little story' is actually a handbook of how to understand the varieties of being and knowing we encounter as we journey through various lands that lie beyond the ordinary."

To which I'd add, myths are also a handbook for the journey we make through the here and now, although the guidance they give us comes couched in symbolism and analogy because most of us don't have encounters with Coyote or Woden — at least not that we're aware of.

I think this aspect of fantasy, or what I'd rather call mythic fiction, is one of its strongest appeals when the setting is contemporary: it allows us to read stories that, beyond their entertainment value, also give us mythic guides to show us ways to understand and to move through the welter and confusion of this world in which we find ourselves.

Mythic poetry does the same thing, except here the experience is intensified. What we find in poetry aren't the bones of the story, pared down to their simplest measure, but rather the heart of the story, distilled to its purest essence. When it's done right, a few lines of poetry can pack more punch than all the pages of a fat novel.

In this first collection of her poetry, Carolyn Dunn hits the mark

so often, and writes with such confidence of the shadowy world of the spirits, that you find yourself wondering if she's entirely of this world herself. Deer Woman and Coyote wander through the verses, always changing, always bringing change, but the transformations that Dunn chronicles are more often instances of human change and self-understanding. Experiencing them allows us to recognize the patterns that take shape in our own lives.

Dunn's language is a perfect blend of the matter-of-fact and the mystic. Her stories are political, sensual, personal, and if not universal, they're certainly not specific to only one gender's or one community's experience. Tears, joy, rage, mystery, and a desire — no, a *need* — to understand all stride through the pages of *Outfoxing Coyote*, but the largest presence is heart: the heart of a poet who shares the gift of her stories with resilient tenderness and unflinching strength.

Highly recommended.

Sojourn, by Ron Marz and Greg Land, CrossGeneration Comics, ongoing, \$2.95.

Considering the unlimited budget that comics books have, I'm

really surprised that there isn't more fantasy and science fiction published in this medium. By "unlimited budget" I mean that it costs no more money to have an artist depict some fantastic creature or landscape than it does to depict ordinary people and contemporary cities. Before the recent advances in computer-enhanced special effects, really doing it right would cost a fortune in film, if it could be done at all. But comics have no such limitation.

And it seems a given that the medium that specializes in superheroes in tights would also present more genre work, but that isn't often the case. And high fantasy is particularly underrepresented.

There have been, and currently are, high fantasy comics, of course. Jeff Smith's *Bone* comes quickly to mind, but the art, charming though it is, still reminds me of *Pogo* (which isn't a bad thing, and Smith does tell a wonderful story). And then there was the venerable *Elfquest* by Richard and Wendy Pini, although its presentation was even more like a cartoon.

Until *Sojourn*, we've seen very little high fantasy with realistic art (if, considering the subject matter, you'll pardon the term realistic). And certainly not on a regular

monthly schedule, with high storytelling values.

The storyline is largely successful as well, if a little familiar in places. There is an evil lord of darkness whose armies have taken over all the known kingdoms. Set against him is a very small, but growing band of rebels, on a quest to recover long-hidden magical artifacts they have been told will help them defeat him.

But although the basic shape of the story is familiar, Ron Marz throws enough twists into the mix to keep things interesting, and his dialogue — especially that among the human characters — is crisp and fresh.

Now while it's true that Greg Land's women are amply endowed, so are his men. Everything's a little larger than life, but this is a story told on an epic scale, so perhaps that can be forgiven. And certainly his castles, his landscapes, his dragons and magical characters are wonderfully and painstakingly realized. If you can shut out the world and lose yourself in the art, it's easy to believe you're actually in this other world.

To appreciate what Marz and Land are doing here you have to be a fan of books such as George R.R. Martin's absorbing *A Song of Ice*

and *Fire* series, or the recent film adaptation of Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring* — in other words, high fantasy with an epic scope and a somewhat militaristic slant. But if you are, you really should try an issue of *Sojourn*. It does what the prose books do, only in pictorial form.

Back issues of the comic can be picked up at your local comic book store (it's up to #11 as I write this in May) and I'm sure CrossGen will soon be publishing trade collections.

For samples of the art, check out their site at www.crossgen.com.

Fables, by Bill Willingham, Lan Medina and Steve Leialoha, Vertigo, ongoing. \$2.50.

Of course, just because you have a "big budget" in comics doesn't mean you have to use it. Many of the more effective comics are set in the world as we know it, one devoid of superheroes in tights and other unlikely extravaganzas. *Strangers in Paradise* comes most immediately to mind. Or any of the wonderful work by Los Bros. Hernandez.

And then there's that hybrid that in prose fiction gets tagged as urban or contemporary fantasy, where it's mostly the real world

with just an extra shot of the mythic brew to give it a kick. *Sandman* is probably the best-known of these, and Vertigo tends to produce the lion's share of similar titles. The caveat is that they're usually quite dark visions.

So up steps Bill Willingham (you might remember him from last year's column in the October/November issue as the most experienced of the Clockwork Storybook writers). Taking a page from San Cibola, the shared world that he and his fellow Clockwork authors created for their website, Willingham brings some of that similar mix of the mundane and magic to the streets of New York City. But what's particularly intriguing about this series is that the main actors he brings on stage are all the best-known characters from fairy tales and folklore.

It seems they're living in exile because some unknown adversary has taken over their own fabled homelands (a sly wink at the film *Shrek*, perhaps?). But the stories Willingham apparently plans to tell aren't so concerned with what happened in those homelands, as what's happening now in NYC, in the hidden world of Fabletown.

The first issue, just out as I write this, provides the setup and

introduces us to familiar faces in new guises: there's Snow White, the Deputy Mayor ("...when talking to her, *never* mention the dwarves") and her sister Rose Red ("the original wild child"); the Big Bad Wolf, head of Fabletown's security; Prince Charming, who turns out to be a real ladies' man; and a number of other familiar names (if not faces) with more to come.

The story arc begins with a possible murder mystery, but I get the sense that Willingham wants to have fun with this series, so that the tone is light-hearted and the focus is on characterization. The artists for this story arc are Lan Medina and Steve Leialoha, both of whom are well known in the comics field. I'm not sure if it was on their own initiative, or if they were directed to do this in Willingham's script, but throughout the art there are any number of nice touches, starting with the street sign on the opening page that tells us we're at the corner of Bullfinch and Kipling.

If Willingham can maintain the quality of his writing, and continue to attract the artistic talent he has here, *Fables* looks to be a winner. And don't fret if you can't find back issues at your local comic book store. Vertigo's known for collecting the ongoing series it publishes

into handy trade paperbacks, which are much more suitable for the bookshelf and where stories such as this belong. But whether you wait for the trade paperback, or pick it up on a monthly basis, *Fables* is a must-read for any aficionado of fantasy in a contemporary setting.

You might also want to try Willingham's take on the world of Neil Gaiman's *Endless* with his four issue limited series *The Thessaliad* (also from Vertigo).

Northern Gothic, by Nick Mamatas, Soft Skull Press, 2001, \$10.

I won't recommend this novella to every reader because of its graphic violence and a certain amount of equally graphic S&M sex, but it's a powerful book exploring intolerance and racism and seems particularly apropos given the present (I write this in May) circumstances in the Middle East, Afghanistan, and pretty much anywhere else in the world where violence is seen as a solution, rather than for what it is: part of the problem.

The point of view characters are a young gay black man named Ahmadi Jenkins, newly relocated from South Carolina to New York

City in 1998 where he hopes to make it as an actor or dancer, and William Patten, a young Irishman who is desperately trying to avoid the draft and ends up getting involved in the Civil War Draft Riots that tore apart New York in 1863.

The 1860s were a time when the Irish were as reviled as blacks wrongly were and it's instructive to see how Patten and the other Irish vent their rage. They have been horribly treated themselves, so you'd think they'd understand how the blacks feel, yet the Irish still take out their anger on the blacks. We also see, in the sections dealing with Jenkins, how quickly one can lose all stability and end up homeless, living on the street.

The two lives, Patten's and Jenkins's, collide through some strange temporal chemistry, so that they get glimpses of each other's world, hear snatches of conversation, and eventually are physically thrown together.

Northern Gothic is a dark and brutal book. Its violence and hopelessness tear at the heart. And while I doubt I'll return to it, reading this novella was an instructive reminder of why we must always stand up against intolerance and defend every individual's right to personal freedom.

If your local book store can't

get you a copy, try contacting the publisher at (888) 876-6622, or on the Web at www.softskull.com.

Once..., by James Herbert, Tor Books, 2002, \$26.95.

It's been a while since I've read James Herbert. I don't know exactly why, though I'm sure it has more to do with the flood of books being published than any disinterest on my part. I've certainly enjoyed his work in the past and I'm not alone. In his native England, Herbert sells as well as his contemporaries such as Stephen King and Dean Koontz, perhaps better at times.

The Herbert I remembered before starting this new novel wrote dark books, often *very* dark and grisly (try *The Rats*, his opening salvo to the publishing industry, to see what I mean), so I was very curious, and a little nervous, to see what he would do with a fairy tale theme. How dark would he make it? How detailed and graphic would he write those dark scenes? Quite dark and detailed, I found. But only where it's necessary for the story. With *Once...* he also proves to have a sweet side to his writing that I never would have expected.

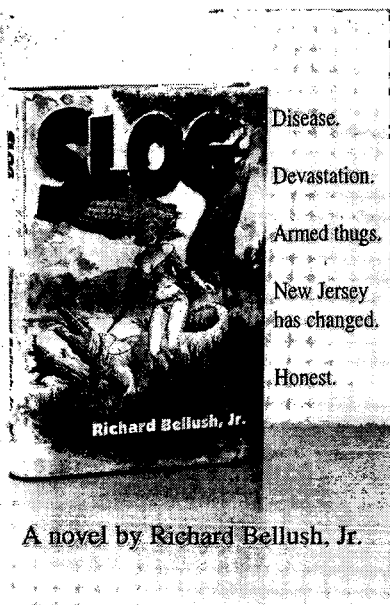
The novel opens with Thom Kindred returning from the city to

his rural childhood home to recover from a stroke. On his very first night in the cottage of Little Bracken, darkness and danger descends, and this reader at least thought, here we go. City slicker meets rural horror.

Such isn't really the case, though. It's true that there are moments of great darkness, but much of this book could have been readily, and aptly, illustrated by Brian Froud. For while *Kindred* is confronted with dangerous creatures and an evil witch, he is also introduced to the whole world of fairy — dancing lights, undines, and every sort of twig and leaf creature you might imagine. In fact, track down a copy of Froud's and Alan Lee's *Fairies* and you'll have the perfect visual reference.

Herbert describes *Kindred*'s fairy creature encounters with loving detail — the same loving detail he applies to the countryside in which the book is set so that both come wonderfully alive for us. But while there are elements of sweetness in *Once...*, Herbert doesn't lose his edge. The plot is filled with tension. There's probably more sex than I've run across in a book in some time — both gentle and nasty. And it's about as good a contemporary fairy tale as I've read in a long time.

As for the dark side of the book, forget Disney and go back to the



original versions of fairy tales. You'll find Herbert is being far more honest with his sources than have many others who have tried their hand at using this material in a contemporary setting.

The Sir Arthur Conan Doyle Reader, edited by Jeffrey Meyers and Valerie Meyers, Cooper Square Press, 2002, \$28.95.

This new sampler makes a good argument that, like his friend H. G. Wells, and Jules Verne, we can claim Arthur Conan Doyle as a father of science fiction, much as he's already been claimed by the mystery

genre as one of their own. Yes, I know that Edgar Allan Poe is widely considered the inventor of the mystery story, but Conan Doyle certainly went on to define it, and while there will be readers pressed to remember either of their names, I doubt there's anyone who would fail to recognize that of Conan Doyle's most famous character, Sherlock Holmes.

Holmes is represented in this sampler of Conan Doyle's writing, but you'll also find a wide variety of other styles: everything from science fiction and ghost stories to historical fiction, political writing, and autobiographical material. What remains striking, no matter what the subject matter, is his eye for detail, his deft prose, his continued *readability* to this day — even when he's writing about spiritualism, or raising a passionate argument against Belgium's looting of the Congo in the late nineteenth century.

I don't doubt that readers unfamiliar with anything but the Sherlock Holmes stories will be seeking out Conan Doyle's other books after sampling some of the material collected in this handsome volume. Particularly appealing to this reader were the Errol Flynn-like escapades of Brigadier Etienne Gerard — an officer in Napoleon's

army with a rather high opinion of himself — or the clever and entertaining adventures of Professor Challenger and his companions in *The Lost World* or the doomsday scenario as depicted in *The Poison Belt*.

A Story for Bear, by Dennis Haseley and Jim LaMarche, Harcourt, 2002, \$16.

Jim LaMarche was the artist for Donna Jo Napoli's *Albert*, the story of a man who had to stand still for a couple of months because a cardinal had built a nest in his hand. This time out, Haseley provides a story of a woman who reads stories to a bear, and LaMarche turns in yet another outstanding job with the art.

The book is aimed at readers in the five-to-eight age range, but anybody who loves books will appreciate this short, sweet tale. And LaMarche's work with colored pencils is a pure delight to behold.

Goad: The Many Moods of Phil Hale, Donald M. Grant, 2002, \$29.99.

And now, as a once well-known British comedy troupe was wont to say, for something completely different.

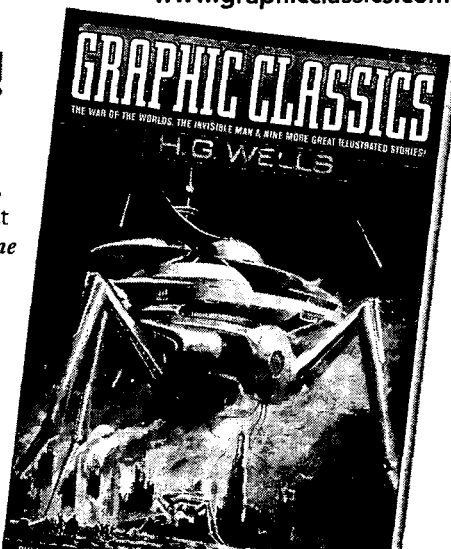
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since *Double Memory*, his 1992 collaboration with Rick Berry, shows us that the artist has lost none of his brash enthusiasm for darkness and movement. In paintings, drawings, and photographs he captures an energy here that is both exhilarating and disturbing.

The production values, as you might expect from a Grant book, are outstanding, but in the end it's always the art that's most important. It could be printed on newsprint, so long as it moves you. You might love the work, you might hate it. You might find a pithy

comment to make, as does Tray Batey in his introduction, describing Hale's oils in a London gallery show as "clumsy, hysterical; schoolgirlish in their sobbing approximation of charm...the room swung about them like a gardening accident."

But I guarantee, the art in this book won't leave you unmoved.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2. ☞



Books

ELIZABETH HAND

Henry Darger: In the Realms of the Unreal, by John M. MacGregor, Delano Greenidge Editions, 2002, \$85.

Darger: The Henry Darger Collection at the American Folk Art Museum, by Brooke Davis Anderson, Essay by Michel Thévoz translated by Catherine G. Sweeney, American Folk Art Museum, New York, in association with Harry N. Abrams Publishers, 2002, \$29.85.

J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century, by Tom Shippey, Houghton Mifflin, 2002, \$13.

INSIDE OUT

EARLIER THIS year, people in New York lined up to gaze upon vivid, large-scale images of a world not unlike our own, populated by a childlike race engaged in an epic battle with the monstrous forces of

Evil which sought to enslave them. Dragons, demonic creatures, richly detailed landscapes, carefully wrought battle sequences and eruptions of cataclysmic weather; all sprung from the imagination of a devout Catholic, born in 1892, whose world reflected a lifelong preoccupation with Christian mythos as well as the dark matter of twentieth-century war and technology.

Peter Jackson's first installment of *The Lord of the Rings*? No: the paintings of Henry Darger, the so-called Outsider artist whose massive body of work, painted and written, has posthumously established him as one of the major creative figures — and certainly one of the most provocative — of the last century. Since its discovery in Darger's apartment a few months before his death in 1973, the immense trove of scroll-like paintings and collages, fictional text, and autobiographical material has incited the kind of interest one might

expect from the successful translation, after nearly a century of failed effort, of the Linear A tablets from ancient Crete. Yet even as Darger's lifework is embraced by a critical establishment, that of another singular artist, J. R. R. Tolkien, continues to suffer critical condescension and often outright disdain, despite (and no doubt because of) its huge commercial success.

Tolkien and Darger were almost exact contemporaries — born a few months apart in 1892 and dying less than a year apart, Darger in late 1972 and Tolkien in September 1973. Though they lived and died in radically different worlds (Tolkien spent most of his life in England, Darger in Chicago), and had adult lives that could not be more diametrically opposed, their early years have an eerie, almost uncanny symmetry. Both were profoundly affected by early childhood losses. Darger's mother died a few weeks before his fourth birthday; Tolkien's father a few months after his. Both became orphans at an early age. After his mother's death (from diabetes), the twelve-year-old Tolkien and his younger brother came under the charge of a benevolent priest, before being taken in by a relative-by-marriage. In 1900, Darger's ailing father entered a

Catholic mission; his son was consigned to a Catholic boys' home, and upon his father's death five years later, the thirteen-year-old Darger was institutionalized (he later escaped). Both began work on their epics around the same time, 1913 for Tolkien, Darger a year or so earlier. Both used visual as well as written forms for their art. And both chose as fictional oeuvres the lifelong creation of a single, epic history of an imagined world: Tolkien's Middle Earth and Darger's Realms of the Unreal.

In *Henry Darger: In the Realms of the Unreal*, art historian John M. MacGregor has created a magisterial work that at times seems as immense and all-encompassing as the one which it explores. MacGregor is the author of the 1988 *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane*, a seminal study of one manifestation of the form that has been variously called Art Brut, Folk Art, Self-Taught Art, Visionary Art, but which is now commonly classed under the catchall term Outsider Art. The elastic phrase has been applied to artists as disparate as the Victorian fairy painter Richard Dadd (neither an outsider nor self-taught but unquestionably mad); Chris Mars, one-time musician for the Replacements, whose paintings deal

with the familial fallout of schizophrenia; the folk artist Howard Finster; and the anatomical transcendentalist painter Alex Grey. "Visionary" is probably a more appropriate description, especially if modified with "obsessive" or "obsessional" (which could also be applied to much of Tolkien's written work).

Perhaps the most poignant reaction to such personal, intense forms of creative expression comes from the artist Nathan Lerner, Darger's landlord and the man who, with a student assistant, discovered Darger's monumental accomplishment after his death —

"What made him do all these things that didn't have to be done?"

What indeed? Henry Darger may not have been insane, but he was as close to a poster boy for the Outsider Artist as we are likely to get. A few weeks before Darger's fourth birthday, his mother died of puerperal fever after giving birth to a girl. The infant, Henry's sister, was given up for adoption; her history is unknown, but it is clear that her disappearance, following his mother's death and his father's subsequent grief, became the central

event upon which the adult Darger constructed his brilliant, severely disturbed and disturbing history of *The Realms of the Unreal*. After his stint at a Catholic boys' home, in 1904 the twelve-year-old Darger was placed in the Lincoln Asylum for Feeble-Minded Children.

Henry remained at the asylum until 1909. The reasons for his presence there were his propensity for aggressive behavior; setting fires; "acquired" self-abuse. This last appears to have been what motivated the assessing physician to pronounce the child insane. Yet whatever severe psychological orders assailed him, the young Henry was not feeble-minded. He was intelligent and loved to read, particularly newspapers and military history (the Civil War was an especial passion). MacGregor suggests that Darger may have suffered from Asperger's Syndrome, a comparatively mild form of autism whose traits include difficulty in establishing and maintaining human relationship, obsessional behavior and interests, and often normal or above-normal intelligence and verbal fluency.

Despite Darger's later casual dismissal — "Finally I got to like the place and the meals were good and plenty" — the asylum seems to

have been a nightmarish institution, marked by violent outbursts and lacking in any compassionate interaction between its employees and inmates. Summers provided a surcease, when Henry was sent to work on the State Farm outside the city. After several aborted efforts at running away, the seventeen-year-old Henry finally did so for good, returning to Chicago where he found work as a janitor at St. Joseph's Hospital.

"Now it is a strange thing, but things that are good to have and days that are good to spend are soon told about, and not much to listen to; while things that are uncomfortable palpitating, and even gruesome, may make a good tale, and take a good deal of telling anyway."

So Tolkien muses in *The Hobbit*. And while the remainder of Henry Darger's life can only with great difficulty be construed as "good," it was certainly without great event, at least to any outside observer. In 1917 he was drafted and a few months later discharged for medical reasons. After that he worked as a janitor and dishwasher at various hospitals. In later years

when he grew too frail for these jobs he was given other menial tasks. He seems to have ever had only one real friend. In 1932 he moved into the rooming house where he was to spend the rest of his life, most of it in a single large room. In 1956 the building was bought by the artist Nathan Lerner, an amiably Bohemian landlord who created a small floating world of artists, musicians, and students who tolerated Darger's presence and made small gestures of friendship to the lonely old man.

Lerner was an exceptionally compassionate landlord: he neither raised Darger's rent nor complained about his tenant's housekeeping. He and the other residents of 851 Webster took turns helping Darger, providing the occasional meal, assistance with medical care; most important, they provided contact with a world outside the one in Darger's head. For by the 1960s Henry Darger had become one of those lost souls who populate the edges of any urban landscape, usually glimpsed from the corner of one's eye: a furtive, slight man — he was just over five feet tall — he wore the filthy ruins of his Army overcoat and spent hours every day wandering back alleys, poking through trash cans for refuse which he then brought back to his room.

Darger's neighbors often heard him talking to himself, carrying on lengthy conversations in which he took on different voices. He was in fact engaged in the final stages of a lifelong battle with God, a struggle which he had recorded in his vast multivolume epic, and which eventually found its way into his autobiography.

Had trouble again with twine.
Mad enough to wish I was a
bad tornado. Swore at God,
yet go to three morning
masses. Only cooled down by
late afternoon. Am I a real en-
emy of the cross, or a very very
sorry saint?

Ah yes: the eternal problem of the struggle with twine. And yet what do our lives really consist of, most of the time, but precisely this: life-or-death battles with the shopping, the commute, the boss, the kids, the spouse, the neighbors, the neighbor's dog; God? Each age gets the art it deserves, and no doubt we get the saints we deserve as well; in which case Henry Darger is infinitely worthy of the critical canonization he has received in the decades since his death. The end came a few months after he finally left Webster Street for a Catholic

nursing home. He was eighty years old. Not long before he died Nathan Lerner entered Darger's room to clean it. As he said in a personal recollection,

It is a humbling experience to have to admit that not until I looked under all the debris in his room did I become aware of the incredible world that Henry had created from within himself. It was only in the last days of Henry Darger's life that I came close to knowing who this shuffling old man really was.

What Lerner found under the compulsively organized piles of twine and spectacles and newsprint was the eight-volume biography Darger had been working on since 1963 — and, in a number of old trunks where they had been stored, the trove of original artwork that has now made Darger world famous. In MacGregor's words,

...fifteen volumes, 15,145 typewritten pages, unquestionably the longest work of fiction ever written. In time the room also yielded the three huge bound volumes of illustrations for that work, several

hundred pictures, many over twelve feet long and painted on both sides. By accident, the landlord had stumbled upon a concealed and secret life work which no one had ever seen: Darger's alternate world.

That world is a vast nameless planet orbited by our own Earth. The frontispiece of Volume One of its history reads:

OF THE STORY OF THE
VIVIAN GIRLS,
IN WHAT IS KNOWN AS
THE REALMS OF THE UN-
REAL,
OF THE GLANDECO-AN-
GELINIAN WAR STORM,
CAUSED BY THE CHILD
SLAVE REBELLION

The Vivian Girls! Seven plucky child princesses who, with their brother Penrod, battle the adult, male Glandelinians, enemies who exist solely to capture, imprison, and especially torture the child-slaves of the Christian country of Abbiennia. Modeled largely upon the books he loved as a child — L. Frank Baum's Oz books, Johanna Spyri's Heidi stories, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Booth Tarkington's *Penrod* series — Darger's epic follows the

Vivian Girls through an endless relay of scrapes, plots, imprisonments, battles, escapes and cataclysmic storms.

Still, as Darger himself admits in a tone at once wistful and minatory, "This is not the land where Dorothy and her Oz friends reside." Darger seems to have had little innate skill as a draftsman: he created his scroll-like paintings and drawing by means of collage, tracery, photocopying and enlarging pictures, then hand-coloring them, creating an imagistic impasto that is breathtaking, surreal, deliriously funny and very often horrific. The figures of the Vivian Girls and the child slaves are taken mostly from children's coloring books and newspaper cartoons, Disney figures, advertisements, illustrations from *The Saturday Evening Post*; the malevolent Glandelinian generals from newspaper photos and images of soldiers from the Civil War. There are also the beautiful dragon-like Blengiglomeneans and Blenglins, children with ram's-horns and gorgeous butterfly wings. The landscapes are vast, with Toon Town trees and blue-washed skies; though the usual weather consists of cyclones, tornadoes, hail, fire, the "insane fury of crazy thunderstorm." A sample of Darger's captions read

"thrilling time while with bombshells bursting all around," "Children tied to trees in path of forest fires. In spite of exceeding extreme peril, Vivian Girls rescued them," and "Everything is alright though storm continues."

Within Henry Darger's mind, it continued for decades; a firestorm of conflicting impulses. Art critics make much of Darger's luminous use of color and his genius for collage, and certainly many of the paintings in the Henry Darger Collection at the American Folk Art Museum are gorgeous and genuinely breathtaking: a watercolor of the dragonlike Blengins that resembles an Edenic vision filtered through Klimt; portraits of the Glendelinian Generals that anticipate the dizzy swirl of Terry Gilliam's Monty Python animations; a nine-foot panel that shows the Vivian Girls and their followers in an idyllic, flower-strewn setting that evokes the pastoral beauty of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

But this is not Oz. The girl slaves are usually naked (a good deal of the written text involves getting their clothes off); they often have male, but never female, genitals. There is no real economic purpose for their enslavement: the children exist solely to be tortured,

in graphic and appalling detail, by the predatory Glendelinians, who crucify, disembowel, burn, and flagellate them. In his exhaustive study, MacGregor compellingly suggests that in Darger's work we have the singular opportunity to gaze into the mind of someone who, under different circumstances, might well have been a pedophile and perhaps a serial killer of children.

Given America's continuing fascinations with pedophilia and serial murder, it's not surprising that there would be a ready-made audience for work that has the seal of approval of a critical establishment. Yet the power of Darger's art doesn't lie in prurience, or even in the voyeuristic sense of looking upon the work of someone who, almost certainly, would have been frightened and angered by our attention. It's too strange for the former—like the Victorian art critic John Ruskin, Darger seems to have been innocent of the facts of human anatomy, and probably of human reproduction and sexual function as well—and too repellent, in many instances, to incite the sustained voyeuristic interest of most "normal" people. Separated from his visual work, his written text has the monotonous banality of the simplest pornography (only

without the sex]; but taken in toto, *The Realms* is as excruciating and detailed a portrait of the human psyche that we have seen: brutal, banal, transcendental, and with flashes of the divine. As MacGregor says,

Darger's acute awareness of violence and evil in the world, and particularly in the lives of children, was unmistakably derived from the presence of monstrous drives and desires in himself. By withdrawing from the world, the mystic, far from escaping from temptation, opens himself to the encounter with evil in its purest form as it arises from within. Darger, like the Desert Fathers, was repeatedly overwhelmed by such temptations, but by encountering them in the Realms of the Unreal he defended himself against the danger of acting on them in the world.... Evil, carried to impossible extremes, surely must attract the attention of God.

In John Crowley's *Engine Summer*, a race of angelic creatures treasures a crystal globe which has recorded within it the entire

memory and experiences of a single human being, a man named Rush That Speaks. In the novel's final paragraphs, the process of reading the crystal is described by an angel conversing with Rush's encoded consciousness —

Interpenetration, yes. With another...you'll marvel at the dome, the clouds, and tell your story again. What it is to be you when you aren't here but on your pedestal, we don't know; we only know that sometimes you come...

We know nothing else, Rush, but what you tell us. It's all you here now, Rush.

I think that the awe and terror and humility we feel when we contemplate Henry Darger's work is not dissimilar to this sense of interpenetration with another being: it is all you, here; it is all us. The timeless urge to create is what made the profoundly damaged, isolated and lonely man named Henry Darger human. It is also, ultimately, what may make him immortal.

Tom Shippey's *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* will not be the last book written about the master of Middle Earth, but it may

be among the very best. Shippey, now affiliated with St. Louis University in the U.S., has also taught at both Oxford and Leeds University; at both places quite literally carrying on in Tolkien's footsteps. His book's title derives from the notorious readers' poll conducted by Waterstone's, a U.K. bookstore chain, in 1996. The poll was intended to rate the greatest books of the twentieth century; over 26,000 people responded, and more than 5,000 of them put *The Lord of the Rings* in first place. Britain's mainstream literary establishment reacted with the sort of horror that middlebrow, PBS-supporting Americans might evince at the discovery that MTV's *The Real World* had been introduced into the fourth grade Civics curriculum. In the spirit of fair play, the *Daily Telegraph*, Folio Society, and U.K. TV show Bookworm all announced Do-Overs, polling readers again but still coming up with the same terrible news. As Shippey amusingly recounts, "Susan Jeffreys, of the *Sunday Times*... reported a colleague's reaction to the news that *The Lord of the Rings* had won the BBC/Waterstone's poll as: 'Oh hell! Has it? Oh my God, Dear oh dear. Dear oh dear oh dear.'"

There'll always be an England. In the States, of course, people would say "Well at least they're reading *something*" and be relieved it wasn't sci-fi. After all, Tolkien was an *Oxford professor*; which here accords him the same awed respect that fans used to show Juilliard-trained musicians in rock bands. In 1956, however, Edmund Wilson was not impressed, dismissing *LOTR* with venomous condescension in his famous "Oooh, Those Awful Orcs" review for *The Nation*. Five years later U.K. critic Philip Toynbee observed that Tolkien and his books had "passed into a merciful oblivion."

Uh oh.

In yet another cruel example of cultural irony, both Wilson and Toynbee are now known to casual readers for their premature predictions of the death of Middle Earth, rather than for their own contributions to literature. In his book, Shippey does a fair job dealing with Tolkien's critics: their bemusement and often outright hostility toward a successful writer who was outside the modernist canon; a writer who (to use Martin Green's phrase) removed himself from the cultural dialectic.

But Shippey's real achievement is in presenting an extended, careful

analysis of Tolkien's work within Tolkien's own purview: philology, and Old English literature. In *LOTR* and its vast background material (contained in *The Silmarillion* and the twelve-volume *History of Middle-Earth*, edited by his son Christopher Tolkien) the author of the century was consciously creating a mythos for all time. Using word-clues from Old English and fragments of English folk belief, Tolkien attempted to create a body of lore that would encompass the ancient, pre-Christian history of England.

Elias Lonnrot had done this in Finland in the nineteenth century, collecting folktales and ballads and piecing them together into *The Kalevala*. A century earlier, the Scottish poet James MacPherson claimed to have found and translated a great lost Scots text, the epic of Ossian — as it turned out, a fabrication which MacPherson had written himself. A thousand years hence, when all other traces of its literary heritage have vanished, it will be interesting to see if a few of the fifty million-plus copies of Tolkien's opus survive to become evidence of England's heroic past.

An example of Shippey's scholarly detective-work — in this case,

the etymology of Tolkien's Balrogs — defines Shippey's style, at once learned and engrossing. An Old English poem that interested Tolkien was "Exodus," like "Beowulf" a work which Tolkien believed had roots in pre-Christian mythology. The Exodus poet refers to "Sigelwara land," which modern dictionaries translates as Ethiopia. Tolkien disagreed.

...he suggested (in two long articles written early in his career, and now ignored by scholarship) that a *sigel-hearwa* was a kind of fire-giant. The first elements in the compound meant both 'sun' and 'jewel'; the second was related to Latin *carbo*, 'soot.' When an Anglo-Saxon of the preliterate Dark Age said *sigel-hearwa*, before any Englishman had ever heard of Ethiopia or the Book of Exodus, Tolkien believed that what he meant was 'rather the sons of Muspell [the Old Norse fire-giant who will bring on Ragnarok] than of Ham, the ancestors of the Silhearwan with red-hot eyes that emitted sparks, with faces black as soot.'

The fusion of 'sun' and

'jewel' perhaps had something to do with Tolkien's concept of the *silmaril*...it also gave Tolkien Durin's Bane, the Balrog.

I will confess to being someone who has read *The Lord of the Rings* perhaps fifteen times since I first discovered it, thirty-five years ago. I've read *The Silmarillion* three times, and for the past six months have been working my way through the complete *History of Middle-Earth* (I have only one volume to go). As an eleven-year-old I was so inflamed by the discovery that *Mordor* was the OE *murder* that I immediately obtained a copy of "Beowulf" in the original and modern translations and painstakingly proceeded to read both.

Alas, there my efforts at philology ended; but Shippey's book gave me that same sense of astonished delight. It also made me wonder anew at the depth and greatness of Tolkien's obsession —

"What made him do all these

things that didn't have to be done?"

The Silmarillion, which Shippey refers to as the work of Tolkien's heart, is often "a chaotic palimpsest"; *The History of Middle-Earth*, twelve volumes of dense text, genealogy, notebooks, revisions and alternate takes; the genesis not just of *LOTR* but of the lay of Beren and Luthien, Middle Earth's heroically doomed lovers (with whom Tolkien identified himself and his wife, Edith), and the immense tangled tragic "Tale of the Children of Hurin." It does, occasionally, make one yearn for the transparency of *O Elbereth Gilthonial!* But it is also enthralling and, in a strange way, moving: as in the case of Henry Darger, a direct glimpse into the mind and heart and soul of a man of immense and often lonely brilliance.

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In our book column last month, James Sallis sang a few of the praises for Jeffrey Ford's new books, his novel The Portrait of Mrs. Charbuque and his new story collection, The Fantasy Writer's Assistant and Other Stories. This month we give you a chance to sample the wares themselves by reprinting one of the stories that appeared first in the story collection. Jeff Ford notes also that he has published stories recently in a variety of publications, including The Green Man and Other Tales of the Mythic Forest, Leviathan #3, Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet, and Pulse Pounding Narratives. He lives in southern New Jersey and hints that this fantasia might not be as autobiographical as his last two contributions to our pages.

Something by the Sea

By Jeffrey Ford

MAGGIE RAN AHEAD OF HIM down the path in the failing light, the sleek gray whippet, Mathematics, moving gracefully at her side. Her Uncle Archer came hobbling slowly along behind with his cane, a picnic basket draped over one arm.

"Watch that tree root at the turn," he called, "it will try to grab your ankle."

Her laugh came back to him and he smiled.

It was a warm twilight of sudden, billowing breezes that rushed through the leaves and made the boughs sway. Night was mixing quickly into the last faint glow of red, filling the woods with shadows. Off in the distance could be heard the calm and methodical heartbeat of the ocean, while closer a night bird sang melancholic, trilling its low whistle from within a tangled thorn bush.

He rounded the bend in the path and beheld his niece — powder-blue pajamas, pigtails, and bare feet — standing uncharacteristically still, head cocked back, and gazing at a firefly floating erratically midway between her nose and the rustling green canopy above.

"Look, Uncle Archer, the first one of the night," she turned and said when she heard him behind her.

"There will be more," he said. "Soon they'll all be out and we'll have to put on dark glasses."

"Silly," she said matter-of-factly and continued on her way. "Come, Math," she called back to the dog.

The path meandered for a quarter mile through the woods, and by the time they reached the *observatory*, as Archer called the small clearing, they had only the Moon and fireflies to light their way. Two fan-backed wicker chairs and a low, glass-topped table were there waiting for them. Archer put the picnic basket down on one of the seats and drew back its leather cover. From within, he retrieved a candle and placed it on the table. Leaving his cane propped against the arm of the chair, he stepped uneasily over to the trunk of an oak tree at the boundary of the clearing.

Maggie took her uncle's arm and steadied him as he unwound the cord that, at their end, was twined around a cleat driven into the trunk and, at the other, looped up over the one branch that jutted out above the furniture. Once the line was clear, he released it slowly, a handful at a time, lowering an orange globe the size of a beach ball from where it had hung, up near the sheltering branch. When the lantern had descended, twirling and swaying, to a foot above the table, he rewound the extra cord around the cleat.

"Can I light it?" she asked as they moved back to where the orange ball swung.

"Absurd," said Archer, reaching into his vest pocket. He took out a cigarette lighter that had the form of a derringer. "You can get the hatch, though," he told her.

Maggie climbed upon the other chair and, reaching for the globe, unhooked the curved panel that opened on delicate hinges, while her uncle shot a spark of flame at the wick of the candle. "Hold it still, now," he said, and she steadied the lantern. He carefully fitted the candle into its place inside the globe and then closed it. A warm glow filled the sphere and radiated subtly throughout the observatory.

"Hoist it," he said to her and she did the honors at the tree, unwinding the cord from around the cleat. As she slowly pulled back on the line, she watched the rising lantern and thought of it as a miniature sun, and then

a soul. When she had the line secured, she turned back to her uncle, who had taken from the picnic basket a folded quilt that he was just then unfurling. She stepped forward as he held it up in front of him like a bullfighter's cape. "Madame Margaret," he said. When she was before him, she turned her back, and he draped the cover of a hundred different textures and colors over her shoulders.

A queen in a procession, she marched to her chair and, with the blanket wrapped around her from her neck to her shins, sat back onto her throne. Mathematics curled up at her feet, and she rested the soles of them lightly, one on his rib cage, one on his haunch. Archer placed the picnic basket on the ground next to him, seating himself in the chair. Leaning over, he then took from the basket a thermos and two glasses, and what appeared to Maggie to be a tall, slender-necked vase ending in a kind of cup, with a base like a bulging belly etched in a flower motif. There was a thin hose attached to one side that tapered into a nozzle.

"Is that a magic lamp?" she asked him.

"Sort of," he said, as he opened the thermos. He poured her a glass of tea and then lifted the top off the odd contraption and poured some tea inside it as well. Fitting the bowl top back in place, he said, "It's called a hookah, or a *narghile*."

"Does a genie come out when you rub it?"

Archer laughed. "This part here," he said, pointing to the bowl at the top, "is called the *lule*." His finger then moved to the neck. "This is the *marpuc*," he said. "The *govde*," pointing to the body. "And this is the *agizlik*," he told her, and put the end of the nozzle momentarily into his mouth to test its draw.

Maggie leaned forward to take her glass of tea from the table, and her uncle thought he caught a glimpse of what she would look like when she was older. There was an expression of seriousness in the brow, a slight indication of uncertainty around the eyes that he feared would become more pronounced with time.

"The narghile should always sit on the floor or ground," he said to her. "That is proper etiquette, but I am too old and crippled to sit down there with my legs crisscrossed like a pretzel."

"What does it do?" she asked, lazily reaching out for but missing a firefly that passed by her head.

"For smoking," he said. With this, he lifted his cane and twisted the onyx crow's-head handle, which came away from the stick in his hand. Very carefully, he moved the ornament over the top of the hookah and tilting it, watched as a fine dark powdery substance fell in grains from a tiny hole at the end of the beak, filling the water pipe's bowl.

"Can I try it?" asked Maggie.

"You are too young," he said as he reattached the black head to the cane. "I need the smoke sometimes to keep my internal engine running, to, as they say, get up a full head of steam. You have all of the energy you need. Besides, the smoke teaches contemplation and patience, and it is a child's job to be *impatient*."

"Is that tobacco like what my father puts in his pipe?" she asked.

"Hardly, my dear. This is the house blend, the recipe of sultans — mixed with perfume and crushed pearls."

"What's inside a pearl when you crush it?" she asked. "A yolk?"

"No," he said, "that's an egg."

"What?"

"Something," he said and pulled the trigger on the derringer, lighting the contents in the bowl until it began to smolder. He pocketed the lighter and then lifted the nozzle at the end of the hose to his mouth. For the duration that he drew in, Maggie sipped her tea. Its flavor was a mix of orange and peach and some other soothing ingredient. She imagined she was drinking the glow of the lantern.

Archer exhaled slowly, and the pale violet smoke grew up into the night from his open lips like the ghost of a vine, spiraling, knotting, nearly taking the form of a blossom before dissipating.

"Where's the telescope?" asked Maggie.

"There is none," he answered.

"But you call this the *observatory*," she said. "I thought that was a place where you looked at the stars."

"Precisely," he said, took another toke, exhaled, and then leaned back in the chair with a faint smile.

"They will be coming for me tomorrow," she said.

"I'll be sorry to see you go."

"Will you bring Math with you and visit us in the city at the holidays?" she asked.

"Perhaps."

"Yes," she corrected. There was a pause and then she asked, "Do you think my parents have been arguing while I've been away?"

He had meant to tell her, "Of course not," but instead he heard himself saying, "I don't know."

"My father is going to leave us," she said. "Mother told me he might."

"Well, let's wait and see what happens," he said. "And while we are here, I believe I promised to tell you a story, one that you will remember until next summer."

"Tell me one that will make me remember the beach and you and Math even when it's dark and snowing. Something by the sea, please," she said.

He leaned forward to relight the bowl of the hookah. This time as he drew on the nozzle, she peered through the dim light at him, studying his features — long beard, thinning hair, high forehead, and round cheeks with a scar across the right side — in order to commit them to memory, like a photograph for her mind.

"I left home at a very young age," he said, his eyes closed, "and went to sea as a cabin boy on a large vessel out of Kelmore, bound for exotic locales, with the sole mission of capturing a strange creature for the garden zoo of a millionaire."

Maggie down put her tea and leaned back in her chair to listen, all the time thinking what a wonderful father the dog at her feet, Mathematics, would make.

"The name of the ship was *The Mare*, and it had three masts, three bright yellow sails, and a crow's nest. The figurehead was that of a wild horse with a mane of wooden flames and eyes made from what were rumored to be the two largest rubies in the world. Our captain was a fine old man named Karst, easygoing and just, who could split a proverbial hair with his tongue and a real one with a dagger at twenty paces."

Maggie pictured the wild horse, which melted into Math, who rode her on his back to school, made her hard-boiled eggs for lunch, and read stories to her at night next to the fireplace. She saw her mother, tears in her eyes, sitting at the kitchen window of their apartment in the city, staring out at the rain-washed streets while Math sat beside her, quietly, patiently, with his paw resting gently atop her forearm.

"The crew of *The Mare* was an odd and interesting lot, men who had spent so much time on the ocean that their eyes, no matter the color they were born with, had all turned blue, and their faces were like dark leather, cured over time by the Sun and salt spray. There was a man named Farso, who had once been a pirate and whose entire body was tattooed in aquamarine and rose with scenes of the war between Heaven and Hell — fierce angels and cunning demons battling with broadswords amongst the clouds, amidst the flames. On our first day at sea, he gave me the nickname Beetle, and it stuck to me the way the jagged legs of that insect fasten themselves to a sweater."

"Did he ever kill anyone?" asked Maggie, thinking of Math standing upright, with his concave stomach and ridged back, a long gray paw placing the shiny tin star atop the Christmas tree while her mother applauded.

"Farso?" said Archer. "I should think so, for he kept a cutlass in the sash that was his belt, the blade of which was stained red. I don't believe it was raspberry juice that had discolored the metal, if you catch my drift. One night, when we were becalmed in the Sea of the Dolphins, as we sat in the rigging of the main mast in the moonlight, he told me how he had witnessed the birth of a child in a tavern of Sechala, the pirate town of Peru. This incident tipped the scales, and the war, the one depicted upon his flesh, between good and evil that had raged inside him since his own birth, was finally won by Life. He had only glimpsed the child for an instant, he said, but its wide eyes, taking in the new world around it, shot out an invisible beacon that bored into his heart and vanquished his fear of Death."

"We studied the oceans and seas of the world," said Maggie. "I never heard of the Sea of Dolphins."

"Am I to be held accountable for the state of education in these dry times?" asked Archer, pouring himself a glass of tea.

She laughed, as Math laughed beside her, at the antics of the mari-onettes on the stage of the puppet theater. The dog turned to her in the dark of the auditorium and whispered, "I know how to cure your mother's unhappiness, to dissolve her ghosts and sadness, for you know she is troubled behind her eyes."

"Insane," said Maggie, a word she had only recently learned.

"Quite," said Archer and then continued. "Another of the fellows aboard ship was Hustermann, a giant of a man who had never been granted the power of speech, but who could haul in the ship's anchor by himself. There were also the Fong brothers, identical twins from a village on the South China Sea, who had their own invented language of whistling with which they told each other secrets. A man from the frozen north, Kekmi, ate everything raw and went about without a shirt on even when we sailed through waters littered with icebergs. And there were others, a dozen or so, each as interesting as the next. These rough-and-tumble men, with muscles like rocks and dispositions like exotic creatures, who could not live for more than a year at a time on dry land, who had witnessed firsthand the treachery and wonder of nature, all treated me like a prince. 'Beetle,' they called me and, I suppose, saw in my innocence something they had lost and could never regain."

"Beetle," said Maggie. "I'm going to call you that sometimes."

"As you wish," said Archer. "But you might instead want to call me Collo, the name of the ship's mascot, a monkey from Brazil with a long tail and the refined human face of a leading man in the moving pictures, whose purpose in life was to make the crew laugh precisely when things seemed most grim. I remember a typhoon off the Cape of Bad Faith. We were all huddled below decks, the deafening sound of the storm above, screaming like the ocean itself was angry at us, and the jostling, the buffeting, the chaotic tumble as we all gathered around a single lantern, waiting to see if we were to live, or drown and lie forever, slowly rotting, on the slope of some undersea mountain...."

Mathematics led her into the heart of the city, his narrow snout pointing the way through dark alleys, across the piazza, up and down great flights of steps. "What is it called?" asked Maggie. "The cure, what is it called?"

The dog got down on all fours as they stopped by a fountain. "I cannot speak its name," said Math, "for then we will never find it. But, here, I will trace it in the water of the fountain with my paw and you will know it." The whippet leaned over the pool of the fountain and traced the name of the cure in his reflection. Maggie tried to read, to herself, the silvery trail of his design but did not understand. "Never say it," said Math as she became a monkey riding on his back through the long columned hallway of a museum.

"...but that damned primate was a card, I tell you," said Archer, laughing so hard he wheezed and coughed, using the index finger and thumb of his right hand to clear the tears from his eyes. "The spitting image of Randolph Mondrian in *The Marble Lark*, I tell you, especially when he combed back his monkey hair and employed his tail as a mustache." He took the bowl off the hookah and tapped it against the side of the table, clearing its charred contents. He then replaced it atop the water pipe and went through the process of refilling it from the crow's head.

"What about the exotic beast you were capturing for the millionaire?" asked Maggie as her eyelids began to droop.

Archer watched her yawn as he toked at the pipe. He slowly exhaled and said, "Yes, I have yet to tell you about *The Mare's* clandestine passenger, hidden in a crate in the hold. We of the crew had heard only rumors of him, that his name was Chromonis and he needed no air or sunlight or water to survive, and that he was the perfect hunter."

"How many zeros in a million?" asked Maggie as her eyelids closed. She pictured the zeros as a string of pearls.

"Do you know a thousand?" asked Archer.

His niece nodded as if in a trance.

"Ten thousand?" he asked.

She tried to nod again and her head went down but did not rise.

"Use your mathematics," she heard him say and saw an image of the boot at the end of his crippled leg crush a clutch of pearls. A thick dark gas, like the ink of a squid, rose to envelop her momentarily in the aroma of the sultan's perfume. When she looked again, her uncle was asleep and Math had slipped out from under her feet. He stood on his hind legs by the opening to the path they had taken to the observatory.

"Quick, Maggie, we have so far to go," Math said and dropped to four paws. She wriggled out of the wicker chair and threw off the quilt. Passing Uncle Archer, she leaned over and lightly kissed the scar on his cheek. Then, with a skip and a bound, she was on the dog's thin back, her legs wrapped around his rippled rib cage, and they were dashing, with whippet speed, along the path. The night trees went by in a blur, and the wind in her face momentarily took her breath away. Math's haunches released like powerful springs long held back and, yelling to her, "Put your arms

around my neck," he leaped into the sky. They touched down again in the field near the house and then with one more leap they were out over the ocean glimmering with moonlight, flying.

Archer was about to begin his story again when he saw that Maggie had dozed off. He loved to see her so peaceful, but hated to think of her in the clutches of anything as powerful as sleep, where he could not intercede. She looked so small in the wide-backed chair, wrapped like a cocoon in the quilt, so alone in the meager glow from above. The wind blew the leaves and the lantern swung, and he wondered if there was anything more he could have done to save her from the unhappiness that would overtake her the following day.

It was true that her father would be leaving her mother, but what Maggie did not know was that she would be accompanying him because her mother would, by then, have been committed to an asylum for the insane. "Elise," whispered Archer, contemplating his sister and her ghosts. He pictured her tall, stately figure, her long black hair. She had been a kind and gentle mother to Maggie, but those spirits that only she could see, hounding her day and night, had made her dangerous to herself and others, for she believed the sole way to rid the world of them was with fire. The list of disastrous incidents was a catalogue of charred remains and close calls for the child.

The ghosts might as well have also haunted his brother-in-law for, through the years of trying to understand *her* madness, they had drained much of Havrad's personality, leaving him rather cold, haggard, and blank. Archer gave him credit for trying to effect some change that would save the child from any more time in the presence of true madness, but at the expense of a mother's love, it was not a real solution. Life was never so clear-cut as to offer anything as certain as a war between Heaven and Hell. That was for stories. As Maggie's crippled old uncle, he knew that all he was capable of was kindness toward her, and though many would think that enough, he felt its inadequacy tattooed in aquamarine and rose upon his conscience.

Archer refilled his pipe and smoked again. The house blend influenced his thinking, leading him down a back alley of rumination concerning Elise's spirits. One was a fat old man, Grisby, with a long white beard and a ruddy face like Santa Claus, and the other a small, wasted child, a

girl, Quill, with wide eyes and a pale, alabaster face. These two wraiths were always present, reminding Elise of anything that could possibly go wrong. She had told Archer that they spread their messages of gloom with such jolly sarcasm — the possibilities of injury to her daughter, death for her husband, and war and famine and chaos for the world they lived in — like some cosmic joke. At the same time, they protected her from injury, for, as they admitted, without her they would not exist.

Mathematics slipped out from beneath Maggie's feet and came over to sit next to his master. Archer leaned back in the chair and stroked the whippet's smooth scalp. He closed his eyes and saw the fat old man and the child laughing uproariously. Those peals of mirth, at first cacophonous, soon began to flow like music and then like water, gushing down and all around as the fat man held his stomach as if to keep it from bursting and the poor girl pinched her nose with her fingers to hold her breath against the rising tide. Before he knew it, Archer was quite literally at sea. He lost his weak grip on the chair and was floundering, kicking his good leg and flapping his arms in an attempt to stay afloat.

A giant wave took him under, and he sank like a stone down into the depth of the ocean. "I'll drown," he said aloud and his words came as a torrent of bubbles. He did drown but was still somehow miraculously alive. After falling through sleep and miles of jade-green ocean, his feet touched the edge of an undersea mountain. When he kicked off with his good leg in a vain attempt to rise back to the surface, only his spirit ascended in the phantasmal form of his old body, which he left behind to rot on the craggy rock of the sunken precipice.

Then he was Beetle, scurrying along the deck of *The Mare*, heading for the prow at the insistence of Farso, who pointed into the clear sky. The rest of the crew, the Fongs and Captain Karst, silent Hustermann, Kekmi and Collo, all gathered behind the tattooed man and looked up to where his finger pointed.

"I see it," said Beetle.

"It's a girl," said the captain.

And so it was, a girl falling out of the sky.

Farso pulled off his shirt, leaped up onto the prow and then, taking two quick steps along the wooden horse's head and muzzle, dove into the sea. His muscled arms, one bearing the likeness of Saint Michael, one the

visage of Beelzebub, cut the water as he swam with all his might to the spot where the falling girl hit the waves and sank like a cannonball. When he reached the vicinity, he dove.

"I hope she is all right," said Archer in the guise of Beetle. He was the boy, but still strangely aware of the old man he had been. Of two minds at once, he wondered at the odd happenstance of a girl falling from the sky and then at the oddness of being a boy filled with wonder.

The Fongs whistled shrilly and Hustermann brought a hand up to cover his roast beef of a face, one eye peeking through splayed fingers. "Get the medical bag, Beetle," said Captain Karst. "Treatment might be in order."

Beetle ran back across the deck and then down the short flight to the captain's cabin. Archer worried that he might not be able to find the bag, but the boy spotted it sitting next to the globe and knew it immediately. By the time he had rejoined the others, Farso had the girl gripped in his left arm and was swimming on his back toward the ship. Hustermann climbed out over the side and hung down by a rope in order to take the girl from her savior.

She lay on the deck, eyes closed, water glistening on her in the sunlight as if she were a newborn baby. She wore a pair of powder-blue pajamas and her hair was twisted and fastened in the back into pigtails. Captain Karst called for the bag and removed its only contents — a bottle of rum. His knees creaked as he knelt beside the girl and tilted the now-open bottle to her lips. A droplet or two of rum trickled into her, and then they waited. When, after a few moments, she did not begin to breathe, Kekmi, the man of the north, gently pushed Karst out of the way and took his place beside the girl. He leaned down over her and put his open mouth on hers. Collo, hanging by his tail from the rigging, looked down upon the group and clapped excitedly.

Nothing happened for close to a minute, and then Kekmi reared back and spat something small, black, and tentacled out onto the deck. Whatever it was tried to scuttle away, but the better looking of the Fong twins stomped on it, crushing it to a pulp. The girl opened her eyes and coughed. The northerner lifted her and placed her in the captain's arms; he took her below decks, removed her wet clothing and wrapped her in a warm blanket. He and Beetle sat with her, feeding her hot soup, and

listened to her explain how the dog she was flying on had turned into a string of numbers, mostly zeros, which were nothing. Then all that was left was a thin *one*, and she eventually lost her grip on it and fell.

Beetle told her she was safe and with friends. She smiled and asked where she was.

"On a ship in the Sea of Dolphins," said the captain. "You'll stay with us until we return to port and then we will find your mother for you."

"My mother?" asked the girl.

"Of course," said the captain. "Until then, *The Mare* will be your mother, and we will all be your father, except Beetle, here. He can be your brother. Come to think of it, Collo can be your doll, if you like."

"I don't play with dolls," said Maggie.

"Just as well," said Karst. "I don't think the monkey would have liked it."

The waves, the sky, the tropical breezes, and the dolphins always leaping, arcing up out of the sea that carried their name and plunging back to cut the water, marked the passage of time beneath the saffron-colored sails, appearing for all the world like the curtains in Archer's sunroom. Like some montage out of *The Marble Lark* — there was Maggie, riding Hustermann's shoulders to the crow's nest as if he was a plough horse with a penchant for climbing; listening intently and learning in a single day the whistle code of the Fongs; taking cutlass instruction on the poop deck from Farso, who smiled, with three gold teeth, at his pupil's ingenuity; and watching Kekmi carve a dolphin out of whale bone.

Beetle lazed in the moonlight, twined in the rigging, thinking with his Archer-half about how much of the night remained back at the observatory in the forest. Off the starboard side, he saw a ghostly longboat pass, holding a miasmatic old man, fat as a barrel, with a white beard, and a wan, iridescent, young girl. They were laughing without mirth, in a sinister tone. The sight of the spirits frightened him and he closed his eyes momentarily. When he opened them, it was morning, and off in the distance he spotted an island. "Land ho!" he called in his Beetle voice, with his Beetle-half, and below, on deck, the crew crowded to the side of the ship to view the palm-lined shores and volcanic crest of Taramora.

"The home of Neptune's Daughter," said Karst.

"He has a daughter?" asked Farso.

"Does Neptune even exist?" asked Karst. "I believe he is merely an ancient myth. You see, if you were to take the ocean and pour it into the shape of man.... No, I am referring to the *creature* they call Neptune's Daughter. It supposedly haunts the sea caves of this island."

"Is it pretty?" asked Maggie.

"More horrible, I believe," said Karst. "With seaweed for hair and a blue and green mottled body. Slippery like a dolphin, but stalking around on huge webbed feet."

"Claws," said Kekmi.

"My friend is right," said Karst. "It cracks one's head like a walnut, with fangs as thick and sturdy as marlin spikes. Then it scoops out the brains and...you get the picture," said the captain, glancing down at Maggie and then back to the men.

"How do they know it's a girl?" she asked.

"They don't. Men named it," said Kekmi.

Collo, sitting on the captain's shoulder, batted his eyelashes and placed the back of his hand lightly against his forehead.

As *The Mare* approached the island, there was much commotion on deck, for the men were hauling out of the hold, with block and tackle, the large crate that contained the perfect hunter Chromonis. One of the indistinct crew, of the dozen or so whose faces and characters had yet to become clear, utilized a crowbar to pry open the front panel of the container. Its nails released their hold with a screech and the wooden wall fell forward onto the deck. From within the darkness of the crate stepped a man, glistening silver, made all of metal.

The sun's bright reflection off the strange figure shot a beam into Maggie's eyes. This blinding light, combined with the frantic whistling of the Fongs, formed a whirl of flame inside the girl's mind. In the leaping patterns of that fire, she saw, played out, a tableau of her mother in the arms of her father. They were dancing to music performed on the keys of a tiny piano, each snowflake note like the sound of a crystal pin tapping a crystal goblet. She realized eventually that what she had mistaken for a fire was the flicker of a motion-picture projector and that her father was really the actor, Randolph Mondrian. And then Mondrian was, in fact, Collo, hair perfectly combed, pretending to be that leading man with the reputation for romancing starlets. They danced on and on, in tight circles,

through light and dark until finally disappearing into a thick fog redolent of perfume and crushed pearls.

That night, after Maggie had retired to her hammock, the men passed around the bottle from the medical bag and listened, by torch light, to Chromonis recite the times tables in honor of the morrow's hunting. He stood tall and straight like an ambitious young student declaiming Horace. The reflection of the flames played upon his metallic skin, and his eyes, like rivets of light, never blinked. His copper lips did not pronounce words, but merely opened and closed like trapdoors, allowing words to escape, holding them back, straining some to make them squirm through as a means of emphasis. The numbers came and went, and one by one the crew fell into a trance.

Amidst the incantatory rhythm of arithmetic intoned with mechanical accuracy, like a molten rain upon the senses, Farso had a vague recollection of walking the plank in shark-infested seas off Zanzibar. Kekmi fell from the prow toward the gaping maw of a sperm whale. Karst recalled a monstrous typhoon on his tail in the Far Tortuga, but forgot if he ever escaped it. Hustermann felt his neck where the rope had once burned, and the Fongs did not whistle about the incurable fever they had contracted back in the Year of the Rat. Even Beetle had the tiniest whisper of a notion of a bullet to his leg, a cutlass across the face.

Through the fog-shrouded swamps of Taramora they slogged. Chromonis led the way, hand-in-hand with Collo. The moss-hung trees twisted in silent agony. The dark unseemly waters that swirled at their feet, the hunting calls of giant crows, and the death wails of diminutive green cats the size of one's fist that scurried along the branches, made Hustermann take Maggie upon his shoulders for protection. Like some pasha from her elephant castle, she scanned the shadowy landscape for a sign of Neptune's Daughter. In her hand she held a pistol, issued by Karst, that fired narcotic darts to tranquilize but not kill the creature. Farso walked beside her mount, whispering instructions to aim for the heart. Around them traipsed the other members of the crew, carrying rifles loaded with the same nonlethal ammunition. Beetle brought up the rear, hauling a rolled up fishing net over his shoulder.

Tall Chromonis, sleek and proportioned as a statue from antiquity, stopped in his tracks, turned to face the others, and sniffed at the fog. His

metal nose somehow twitched, his shining brow wrinkled, and he spoke mechanized words whose sound was not without its own gear-born beauty. "I smell a monster," he said.

Captain Karst looked over his shoulder, and then back to their guide. "Could you be more specific, sir?" he said.

"Very close," said Chromonis.

"Where?" whispered Karst.

The water at their feet exploded, and up from the mire came an enormous form, a head taller than Hustermann. It shook the mud from itself, the long strands of seaweed hair flinging wet globs of it in the faces of the hunting party. A green-blue form, slick with wet earth, as if the Earth itself had come to life, leaped upon Chromonis and, with one deft swing of its muscled arm, knocked the perfect hunter's head off in a graceful arc to land spluttering in a puddle. Gear work and springs, parti-colored wires and sparks, sprayed from his chrome neck. Maggie was the first to shoot, but her trembling aim succeeded only in wounding both Karst and Collo. As Neptune's Daughter lunged into the pack of sailors, moving with the grace and speed of a dolphin through deep water, more rifles were fired, more errant shots finding human targets, until all save the girl and Beetle had been hit.

Collo curled into a ball of sleep. Farso half-heartedly reached for his cutlass, but was unconscious before he hit the damp earth. Kekmi twitched once and slumped down. The Fongs' whistling turned to snoring as they locked in an embrace and remained upright, a twinly dozing triangle. Hustermann pirouetted three times, already dreaming of home and the dance lessons he had been forced to take as a child. When his huge body succumbed to the drug, he fell over like a sack of potatoes. Maggie screamed as he fell, but the creature grabbed her off his shoulders. Beetle watched from his hiding place behind a tree as Neptune's Daughter carried the girl away into the terrifying shadows of the swamp.

The boy wiped his eyes and came out of hiding. He threw down his net and whistled once, twice, not to the dreaming Fongs but for his friend. Mathematics flew down through the trees as if on a wire in a stage play, his left front leg curled for the descent, and landed next to his master. The dog sat and waited while the boy strained and, with much internal fortitude and a good deal of grunting, transformed himself into the elderly

Archer. He knew full well that in this form he would be crippled again and that his cane would be of little help in the swamp, but with grim determination he stuck its end down into the shallow water and set off in search of his niece, the dog following at his heels.

On a beach inside an ocean cave, whose mouth stared out to sea, lit only by the rays of the setting sun streaming in from the horizon like the faint glow from a lantern, sat two figures on thrones made from dry, woven seaweed. A table, made from the same vegetal effluvia of the ocean, was arranged between the chairs, and upon it set a tortoise shell of sea tea and a huge sand-dollar platter holding fancy jelly and starfish. Neptune's Daughter sat with her back to the cave wall, and Maggie with her back to the small wavelets that broke upon the beach.

"The tide is rising," said the creature in a fair voice. She leaned over and poured two nautilus shells of tea. She handed one to Maggie.

"Will you crack my skull like a walnut?" asked the girl.

"Perhaps metaphorically, my dear," she said, smiling grimly through her overbite.

"When you eat a brain, what does it taste like?" asked Maggie.

"Bittersweet," said the creature, staring into the distance, trying to find the right explanation. "Bittersweet. The knowledge goes down rough and offsets the confection of ideas. And then the memories. The memories burst upon the tongue, bubbles of longing and regret, and the entire repast leaves you tired but wanting more."

"Why have you taken me?" asked Maggie, sipping at her tea.

"We are waiting for your uncle. He will be here shortly."

"What would your own brain taste like?" asked the girl.

"Like fire, child," she said. Her claws had shrunk simply to long nails, and the ocean shades of blue-green that had camouflaged her body were softening into pink. Neptune's Daughter was now less a monster and more a woman with dark hair mixed in with the seaweed locks.

"Are you changing?" asked Maggie.

"Look," said her hostess, "here he comes now."

Maggie stood and turned around to see a small figure slogging, waist deep, through the white water at the mouth of the cave. Uncle Archer's journey through the incoming tide, through the rays of the setting sun, seemed to take forever, yet took no time at all. Her heart leaped for joy at the prospect

of rescue. Only when Archer neared the shore did Math emerge from beneath the water's surface — first the ridge of his back and then his snout.

"Let your uncle sit down for a moment," said Neptune's Daughter to Maggie. "And you come and sit on my lap."

"I don't want to," said Maggie.

"Now, now, do as you're told or I'll rip his face off," cautioned the creature.

Archer, out of breath, nodded to Maggie, motioning with his cane for her to do as she had been told. He walked unsteadily, leaning his full weight at times on the cane, to the empty seaweed chair and sat back into it. Mathematics took up a position at his side. He leaned forward for a minute, regulating his breathing, and took a handkerchief from his damp tweed jacket with which to mop his brow. "That water is frigid," he said, shaking his head.

Maggie sat very still on the lap of Neptune's Daughter, feeling as she did sometimes when she was home alone with her mother and smelled the first hint of smoke. The creature wrapped her wet hand around the girl's neck from the back and applied light pressure. "Now, Archer, tell the child the truth or...."

He hung his head, closed his eyes, and began speaking, unable to look directly at them. "When I was young, I went to war against the sultan of an eastern land. I was filled with foolish courage, with bravado, until one day in a skirmish at Taramora, I was wounded in the leg. The bullet shattered my shinbone. An enemy soldier leaped into the pit where I lay, writhing in pain, and brought his cutlass down to skewer my head. A friend of mine, a mathematics professor from Kelmor, John Farso, shot the enemy just as the blade was biting into the flesh of my face.

"Farso, mortally wounded himself, dragged me to safety back to our battalion. I spent the better part of a year on a field hospital cot, screwed to the cosmos on morphine for the pain. It was during that time, at night, when those who were not dying slept beneath the big tent, that the ghosts first came to me — the old man with the beard and the girl with the wide eyes. At first, in my delirium, I thought they were real — good Samaritans helping the wounded. Then one night the girl walked through the man as the man walked through my cot, and once I was aware of their nature, their ill intent became clear to me.

"Another soldier, who had occupied the cot next to mine for a brief time before dying of infection, also saw them. He told me the story of a millionaire and his daughter who had come to the war-torn land of the sultan to sell guns to both sides. They lived in a splendid house in Taramora. The millionaire was not there long before he became enamored of the pleasures of the hookah. He succumbed to the sultan's special recipe and went mad, thinking he was haunted. One night, mistaking the girl for one of his ghosts, he shot her with a derringer he carried in his waistband. When he came to his senses and saw what he had done, he took his own life.

"I was sent home from the front to recuperate, but they followed me. Even on the most beautiful day, out in the sunshine on a green field beneath the swaying boughs of an oak, they made themselves known. My sister, Elise, cared for me, brought me back to full health, save my limp and scar. I told her about the spirits, and in order to allow me to grow strong, she said she would take them from me for a time. We cut our thumbs and mixed our blood on the deal."

"But you never took them back," said Neptune's Daughter.

"They would not return to me, Maggie, I swear," said Archer, tears in his eyes.

"You know the reason they would not return to you," said the creature. "Tell the girl your secret, the thing that protects you," she demanded, raising her voice so that it echoed through the cave.

At that moment, the breaking wave at Archer's back crashed upon the beach and Collo came leaping out of the water. In three incredible bounds he was across the sand and in the air. He landed on the creature's face, wrapping his arms and legs around her head and biting into the smooth flesh of her brow. For an instant, she released her grip and Maggie ran to her uncle.

Neptune's Daughter struggled to her feet, trying to pull the monkey loose, but by then the others had risen from the water and were charging the monster. Kekmi, the Fongs, Farso, Karst, Hustermann, and the headless Chromonis bolted into the cave and knocked her back into her seaweed throne. She struggled wildly against the strong sailors' arms that held her down.

"Hurry," cried the captain.

Archer hobbled away from Maggie to the melee, reached into his pocket and took out the derringer. He leaned over and pulled the trigger, once, twice, three times, setting three small fires at the base of the seaweed chair. The flames jumped up as if he were lighting a pile of three-year-old tinder. "Maggie, come to me," he yelled and held his arms out as he returned to her. She ran, jumped up, and he caught her in midair. For a moment, he teetered, thrown off balance, and then he grunted and righted himself, hoisting her up over his shoulder. She saw Math pick up the cane with his mouth and follow.

As they trudged out through the ever-deepening water from the mouth of the cave, she looked back at the flaming pyre of crew and creature, a pulsating mass of burning flesh and steel. Violet smoke poured out of the blaze, filling the cave, but the only sound was that of twin whistles, twining, knotting, nearly becoming a blossom before dissipating.

Just before they submerged, she saw the whole chaotic inferno as a huge orange ball floating in the dark, and then the water came up, or they stepped down. Archer limped slowly, relentlessly across the ocean bottom, breathing bubbles like strings of pearls. Maggie saw lamprey wriggle in the lime-green light, herds of sea horses flit here and there all of one mind, toppled columns of a sunken palace, the sleek immensity of a whale passing a hundred yards overhead.

The movement of the water around them soothed her and made her weary. She reluctantly closed her eyes, knowing that what had happened had not been right. Already half-asleep, she looked one more time and saw the path through the forest at night. The wind was rustling the leaves. The lantern at the observatory receded in the distance. She hugged Archer tightly as he carried her back to the house.

In the morning the sun came up, round and bright orange. Out to the east there was a ship with three yellow sails on the ocean. Archer and Maggie stood in the drive as the girl's father stepped out of the shiny black car. He stood tall and rigid, little, if any, expression on his face.

"Come, Maggie," he said. "Say good-bye to Uncle Archie and let's be off."

Archer motioned to his brother-in-law to follow him, and then turned and walked away a few yards. Her father did as was requested and joined

Archer out of earshot of the girl. Maggie watched intently, trying to overhear what was being said. At first, her father shook his head and said, "I can't." Archer brought his arm up and wrapped it around her father's shoulders. He leaned over and whispered in his ear for a long time. When he pulled back, his brother-in-law nodded.

"Get in the back seat, Maggie," said her father.

She did as she was told.

"But don't close the door just yet," he added.

She watched as Archer whistled and Mathematics came running from the back of the house. He petted the dog on the head and rubbed his ears. He then clicked his fingers at the height of his chest and the dog stood up on hind legs, resting both front paws against Archer's chest.

His master spoke to him quietly, and then said, "Go!"

The dog bounded over and leaped into the back seat with Maggie.

The car door closed. The car pulled away down the long drive.

Archer woke to the sound of the leaves rustling above the observatory. He leaned forward and removed the bowl from the hookah, tapped it against the side of the table and then fitted it back in place. Filling it from the cane head and lighting it, he considered his dream. As he took in the smoke, he had a vague memory of Randolph Mondrian in a comic pratfall scene from *The Marble Lark* and smiled. Across from him, the girl Quill sat, deep in sleep, wrapped in the hundred colors, while next to him, directly beneath the orange lantern, the old man sat, his white beard rising and falling with his chest and enormous gut, napping like Santa the day after Christmas.

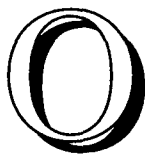
Taking one more toke at the nozzle, Archer's reason sped off like a whippet through the forest. The exhalation, when it came, would be the violet yolk of a crushed pearl, and its sweet aroma would gently awaken his sleeping niece to the now darkened observatory, the last firefly, the wind in the leaves, and the snoring of her uncle.



Terry Bisson is the author of The Pickup Artist, Voyage to the Red Planet, Talking Man, and several other novels. His short stories — including sharp pieces like "Partial People," "macs," and "Next" — appear to be heavily influenced by the satirical sf of Cyril Kornbluth, William Tenn, Frederik Pohl, and Robert Sheckley. This new story definitely belongs to that same sharp strain of fiction. Be careful not to slice your fingers on its edge.

OpenClose

By Terry Bisson



PEN.

Open.

Open, dammit.

Open, godammit.

O-pen!

O-pen, godammit!

Damn.

Call Beth.

Beth, are you there?

Beth, pick up if you are there.

Beth, call me as soon as you get this message. I'm at the airport and I'm locked out of the car.

O-pen.

O-pen you son of a bitch.

O-pen you god damned son of a bitch.

O-pen dammit if —

RIIING

Finally! Beth, thank god.

Yes, she got on her flight. I guess — I saw her going through the security line. Now I'm double-parked by the curbside check-in and I can't get back into the car.

I don't know, it doesn't recognize my voice. Maybe the voice ID is busted, or maybe it's this cold. I just got out to help your mother with the bags. I'm lucky I didn't leave my phone in the car.

Of course I asked it nicely. Are you being serious? This is no joke, Beth. This is a security zone or whatever they call it and they are already starting to look at me funny.

I know you have to be in court, but I have an idea. You are on the voice ID too, so I will just hold the phone up to the lock.

Cool. Okay.

Try it again.

More forcefully.

That's better, No, it didn't open. I mean it sounded better. Try it again.

I'm not sure repetition is the thing.

===!

Shouting is not going to help.

No, I'm not telling you what to do, I'm just making suggestions.

No, I can't leave it here, this is the airport for Christ's fucking sake.

I'm sorry, it's just that it's starting to rain and I don't have an umbrella.

All right, I have an umbrella, but it's in my briefcase and that's in the fucking car and, look, Beth, please just try it one more time.

Good idea. I'll try the passenger side.

Here we are. Slow and steady.

Maybe if I hold it back a few inches.

---. ---.

STEP BACK. UNAUTHORIZED ENTRY ATTEMPT. STEP BACK FROM THE CAR.

Oh, shit.

OO WEE OO. STEP BACK.

That's the car, the alarm system. It thinks we are trying to break in.

OO WEE OO. OO WEE OO.

It gives you three or four tries, then it assumes you are a car thief doing voice impersonations, I guess. Alarm, shut up! Alarm, it's me!

STEP BACK FROM THE CAR! UNAUTHORIZED USER.

There probably is a password but I don't know it. I never use it.

I know I should have it, Beth. I'm sure I do have it. I'm sure it's in my PalmPC which is in my briefcase which is in the fucking car.

OO WEE OO. STEP BACK.

I'm not freaking out, I'm just upset. I think that's legitimate. I think that's understandable.

UNAUTHORIZED ENTRY ATTEMPT.

Now it's really starting to rain.

STEP BACK. OO WEE OO.

Damn. Maybe you should come out here, Beth. I know you're due in court at 2:00 but....

THANK YOU. CHIRP CHIRP.

Hey, the alarm just stopped. Cool. And here comes the police. They must have a skeleton frequency or something. Maybe they will be able to open the car doors. They will probably give me a ticket but that's better than being towed.

Uh oh. It's one of those ashcroft vans.

STEP BACK FROM THE CAR, SIR.

Officer, it's my car, it's locked.

STEP BACK FROM THE CAR. KEEP YOUR HANDS IN PLAIN SIGHT.

It's not the police, Beth. It's Homeland Security. I just saw the twin towers logo.

PUT THE DEVICE DOWN, SIR.

They're not getting out of the van. I think there are two of them. I can hardly see through the glass.

PLACE THE DEVICE ON THE PAVEMENT.

It's not a device, officer, it's a phone. Beth, you'd better talk to these guys. I have no fucking idea what....

SIR! PLACE THE DEVICE ON THE PAVEMENT AND STEP AWAY.

Officer, will you speak with my wife? She's a lawyer.

RIGHT NOW! PLACE THE DEVICE ON THE PAVEMENT.

I don't think they can even hear me, Beth. They won't get out of the van.

RIGHT NOW, SIR!

Okay, okay.

Beth, I have to go. I'll call you back. Don't go anywhere.

NOW STEP AWAY. RIGHT NOW!

Officer, that's my car. That's my phone. I'm a citizen. Here's my Homeland card.

HANDS AWAY FROM POCKETS, SIR! RIGHT NOW!

If you would just let me show you my card.

HANDS IN FULL VIEW, SIR! STEP TO THE REAR OF THE SECURITY VAN.

Officer, it's raining for Christ's sake!

SIR! RIGHT NOW!

I have to get my phone. I can't just leave it on the street in the rain.

YOU ARE IN A SECURITY ZONE. ALL UNATTENDED DEVICES ARE SUBJECT TO PREEMPTIVE DISASSEMBLY.

What!?! You're going to crunch my fucking Nokia? What kind of shit is this?

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE, SIR. APPROACH THE VAN SLOWLY.

So they *can* hear me. Motherfuckers.

PLACE BOTH HANDS IN THE EXTENDED SECURITY LOOP.

What for? Hey!

BOTH HANDS, SIR!

You can't handcuff me. I'm a citizen...Ow!

NOW STEP BACK FROM THE VAN DOOR, SIR. ONE STEP ONLY.

I need my phone. I have a right to call my wife.

YOU ARE IN A SECURITY ZONE. YOU WILL BE ALLOWED A
PHONE CALL WITHIN 96 HOURS.

She's my lawyer. What about my car? It's her car too.

YOU ARE IN A SECURITY ZONE. ALL UNATTENDED DEVICES
ARE SUBJECT TO PREEMPTIVE DISASSEMBLY.

It's not a device, it's a fucking car. It's my car!

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE, SIR. STEP BACK FROM THE DOOR
ONE STEP.

I have a right to call my wife. She's my lawyer.

OPEN.

What is this? Some kind of paddy wagon? No way!

STEP INSIDE THE VAN, SIR.

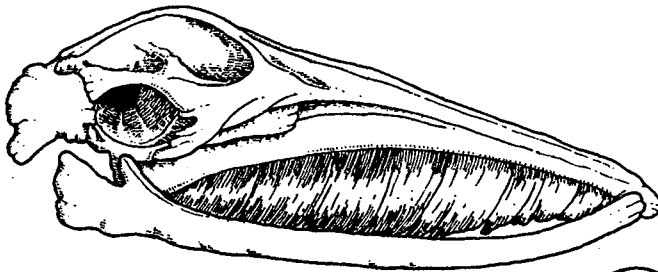
Ow! That hurts! Why are you shocking me? I'm a citizen.

SIT ON THE BENCH.

Okay, okay! But I'm telling you....

SIR! WATCH THE CLOSING DOOR.

Damn it, you can't do this. I didn't do anything. I —
CLOSE. ☞



BALEEN WHALE
(BALAENOPTERA ACUTOROSTRATA)



BALEEN MAN
(UNCLE YADNICH)

long

Robert Reed lives in Lincoln, Nebraska, and writes a lot of short stories—and we have had the good fortune of publishing many of them. His most recent appearance in our pages was with last month's cover story, "The Majesty of Angels." He returns now with a tale that lies in the fringes of the fantastic, in that disquieting realm where you're never quite sure what might happen next...

The Sleeping Woman

By Robert Reed

YOU BRING PEOPLE BY. YOU invite family, friends. Whoever you can rope in. The two-dollar tour begins by admitting that there's an enormous

amount of work to be done, and then you skate right into your plans for the place. For the future. This is where you'll pour the foundation, up here on this high ground. With hand gestures and lines cut in the dirt, you position your front door and kitchen, and over here, on the downhill side, your bedroom windows will stand better than thirty feet above what's now brown brome and wind-beaten cedars. You've got a view up here; everyone can see that much for themselves. This is a quarter section of old pasture laid out along the river bottoms. You bought these bluffs for next to nothing. With the bank's help, of course. Because you have to work for a living, these tours usually happen after nightfall. Your guests have to trust you when you describe the machine shed and long graveled drive and the perennial beds planted with tough natives that won't quit on you with the first hundred and five degree day. You talk about the dream house that you've just about sewn up — a hundred-year-old farmhouse twelve miles

south of your future front door — and all it's going to take is a truck and trailer of suitable size, and a hired specialist to lug the house along some twenty miles of back roads, plus the assorted governmental clearances and the lifting of a couple or three power lines. But all that's nothing. That's just the easiest part of the work. Because your dream house needs a new roof and plumbing, and wiring, and replastering and paint, and more paint, and probably new windows and insulation and whatever else the two of you haven't had the courage to imagine yet.

You are two people, but you've been a functioning unit for what feels like forever. You went to the same one-room schoolhouse as five-year-olds. You grew up playing hide-and-seek and dodge ball together. You first fell in love at the consolidated school, in eighth grade. Then came that ten-month stretch in high school where love failed, and the only compelling emotion that you shared was a deep, perfect hatred for each other. Looking back, you can't remember what the fight was about, or even if there was a genuine fight. What matters is the day when she got stood up by her bitch-mother. It was after school, after band practice, and he saw her standing in the parking lot, her face quiet and tight and a little too focused to notice him. He drove off, down the highway and into the Gas 'N Shop, telling himself that he was dry and needed a Mountain Dew. But he didn't park. He watched himself turn around and head back up to the school. Winnie was easy to see, what with the cars all gone. What with her standing in the middle of the new white concrete, looking betrayed. Her mother was a drunk, and worse, and Jake knew more stories than anyone. Maybe that was why he drove back. He knew Winnie too well to abandon her, however much she pissed him off. But would she take a ride from him? He pulled up slowly, and he made sure to give her a warm strong look. No smile, and nothing that could be confused for pity. Then with a flat voice, he said, "Get in," and reached across the front seat, popping open the passenger door. She came around and shoved her clarinet case into the back seat, and then she was inside, closing the door hard, breathing hard and sitting with her hands in her lap and her face tight and sad, and he said, "Where do you want to go?" They were sixteen. He couldn't remember when he'd last spoken to her. "I'll take you home," he offered. But then she gave him a long look, and quietly, Winnie said, "No." She looked straight ahead, saying, "Let's just go for a drive."

They're in their mid-thirties now. They were married ten days after graduating from high school, and their twentieth anniversary is bearing down on them. It's been a durable, wild business, this marriage. No children, and there can't be any. But there's talk about adopting once they get their house up and running. Jake has gotten a little heavy in the middle and in his face. But Winnie still has her looks. Rust-colored hair and smooth clear skin that never tans and eyes too green to seem real. She has the kind of face and figure that would make the most trusting husband crazy, watching other men watch her. But Jake isn't that tolerant, and he's had his troubles. Out and out wars. There's a tidy scar over his right eye, but the asshole that gave it to him has got at least four of his own. Worse, Jake has fought with Winnie over her wardrobe. Her walk. Everything. She likes being pretty, and she says it's for him, but somehow that doesn't feel like enough of a reason, since she's already got him sewn up and helpless. Why does a person need black underwear to buy groceries? That's what their last fight was about. Her black bra and panties. In the middle of the fight, she yanked off the offending bra and then drove to the store that way. Then she came home laughing, telling Jake how she couldn't get up the courage to climb out of the truck and jiggle her way down the aisles, every old woman and sixteen-year-old boy giving her their best stare.

They're two absolutely different people, except for what's the same. Winnie thinks about kitchen gardens and kitchen countertops and the fine shades of house paint. Where Jake thinks about the big things — the foundation and the house moving and who he knows who will dig them a new well at a fair price. He has his own business moving earth and driving dump trucks, and ever since she quit her nine-to-five at the bank, Winnie's worked for him. With him. Jake knows machinery better than she does, but not much better. And better than anyone else alive, he can judge volumes and weights. How many loads will it take to do the job? He can tell his customers exactly, without a calculator or even pencil and paper. How he does the trick is a mystery. Jake doesn't easily see what happens inside his own head. Sometimes it's Winnie who tells him, "You're worried about bills." Or whatever is wrong. She almost sees his thoughts, telling him, "You're pissed at your dad, aren't you?" And sure enough, he is. It's almost as if he can't plumb his own feelings until she points the way. Which used to be strange. And then it was halfway

reassuring. And now, after thirty years of being wrapped up with each other, it's something that he accepts without second thoughts. That's Winnie. She's knows his mind like Jake knows earth-moving, and in those rare moments of self-reflection, he realizes that most couples never reach that sense of belonging.

The quarter section and dream house are everything to them. Six days of work means that there's Sunday and seven nights where they can do what they want, provided that they can stay awake. To save travel time, they live on their new land. Jake brought in a third-hand trailer, setting it up in a little valley near a long-abandoned farmstead. The original house was burned up ages ago, but there's a shallow well and a working hand pump, and up the slope is a root cellar where they can store their overflow possessions — things that belong in damp, dark basements. It's a clear March day when Jake takes off early from a job, driving up to the county seat to see about the latest batch permits. It's paperwork and bullshit, and he wishes that he didn't have to go. But Winnie, home nursing a cold, promises him dinner, and she's a fine cook. Better than Jake by miles. And things go pretty well in town. The first person that he talks to actually knows things, and by the third person, everything's been taken care of. It's all set. He drops by the Gas 'N Shop for a cold Dew, and he gets Winnie her Diet Coke, and then he's back on the road, driving just a hair over the legal limit until he's off the highway, then taking the graveled roads too fast. The pickup's rear end gets a little crazy, and he makes himself slow down. He drives nice and easy, thinking about nothing consciously, then realizing that he's thinking about work again. They've had a dry, warm winter, which means there's been no shortage of paying work. It's put them behind schedule on the acreage, but there's plenty of money in the bank. Which is different. Which is fine. He smiles as he turns down the long rutted road, bouncing past the tall No Trespassing sign that marks the start of their land, and now he's thinking that he needs a half-day to dump gravel and flatten their driveway to where it can hold up a huge old house riding on a long trailer.

The foundation has been finished. Their front-loader and a fourth-hand John Deere bulldozer are parked near the gray walls of new concrete. Jake drives past and down to the trailer, and climbing out, he notices nothing. Not the silence. Not the smell of last year's grass warmed by the

sun. Not even the hard ticking of the truck's engine. He climbs into the trailer and says, "Back," just before the screen door slams. And again, he doesn't hear the silence. He walks into the bedroom, halfway hoping she'll be there, changing clothes. But she isn't, and he pulls off his dirty crap and jams them into the hamper, and he puts on clean work clothes, planning to push some earth against the new foundation. There's enough daylight for twenty or thirty minutes of work. Minutes that won't come again, ever. Then he walks into that little space that passes for a living room, with the kitchen in the corner, and again, in a voice that can't be missed, he says, "I'm back."

There is no dinner. The realization comes like a slap, and that's when Jake stops breathing, and his heart bucks, and the sensation of falling takes him. He has to check the stove twice, just to make sure that there's no pot hiding somewhere. Then he steps into the fading sun, shouting at nobody, "Winnie! Winnie!"

It's a hundred and sixty acres, if she's here. And night's falling. And Jake can't imagine any reasonable explanation. Her little Chevy pickup is parked where it should be, so she's got to be here. He starts up the hill on foot, planning to look inside the foundation. But that's crazy. She would have heard him pass and come out the basement door. So he turns and goes back to her truck. Touching the grill, he feels nothing but the sun's heat, and his own. He considers walking down into a nearby stand of cedars where she's never gone before. But instead, he looks at the dirt in the driveway, reading the tire tracks until he's mostly sure that nobody else has been here. Finally, he thinks of the root cellar and the promise of a good dinner. Jake's mother has loaded them down with home-canned apricots and peaches, and Winnie likes cooking with fruit, and that's why he starts hiking toward the cellar, moving with a slow, measured gait that betrays nothing of his mood. Asked, and he wouldn't have known that he was worried. He would have turned to Winnie, and she would have told the world, "He's scared for me." Is that what he is? Because he doesn't feel it. He just feels pissed that she's playing hide-and-seek, and he's pissed when she doesn't pop out of the cellar when he gets there. Then he stops at the open door and looks down the sagging wooden stairs, seeing her at the bottom of them, lying there, lying on her right side with her long reddish hair pulled away from her face and one white arm reaching out for nothing

and the other arm tucked under her body to make a narrow pillow, and her legs and little feet are stretched across the bottom steps. And his first conscious thought is that damn, isn't that the strangest place to be taking a nap...?

EVERYONE NEEDS to be annoying, telling him how awful and unfair it is, and how it's the Good Lord's will. His brother, who can be relied on to say stupid things, tells him, "It was an accident. Nothing but. How could you know that that step would give out? And she'd hit her head like she did?" It was the second step from the top that had come loose. "You didn't know," Morgan has to keep promising. But Jake had known. He had climbed those stairs a few times, and it was easy to feel the soggy plank twisting around those rusted nails. A quick fix would have been easy: A couple cheap brackets nailed in from below. But easier still was realizing that you couldn't trust the step, and Winnie had known that full well. What astonished and infuriated Jake was that his wife, smart as she was, could have forgotten something that simple, and with a sharp honesty that makes his brother pale, Jake says, "I don't know what she was doing, but she wasn't thinking. Of all the clumsy-ass things to do!"

"You don't mean that," his brother insists. "Don't even kid, Jake. That sounds awful!"

Jake's response is a determined shrug, and silence.

Morgan can't stop playing the older brother game. "If you need anything," he says. "Anything." Which is nothing but noise, charitable-sounding but meant only to make him feel better. "If you need to talk," Morgan says. "Or maybe you can come stay with us —"

"Shit," Jake exclaims. "I've got a business to run. How in hell can I do my jobs from your guest room?"

Morgan gives him a long look, and then he says, "Sure."

"Want to do something? Leave me to myself," says Jake.

"Sure."

The funeral is at Winnie's old church. She's got sisters and a brother who take charge of everything, and there's a family plot in the cemetery out back, and Jake endures all the praying and misery right up until they carry her box to the hole dug beside her mother, and that's what breaks

him. Seeing her set there, knowing the history between them...well, it's too much. He starts to break down, blubbering into his cupped-together hands. Then Morgan has to throw an arm at him, trying to make things better that way. Which is when Jake backs out of there and heads for the parking lot, doing thirty when he hits the street and eighty-plus on the highway.

Their land stretches along the south side of the river for most of a mile. There are long stretches where it's nothing but brome, with blotches and clumps of cedars in the gullies, looking black-green against the dead spring grass. Three days ago, they drove this road and talked about their plans, and Jake finds himself feeling for her now. Aren't the dead supposed to hover nearby? That's what he's always heard. When Winnie's mom died, her poor suffering father couldn't stop weeping, jabbering on about how he could feel his wife's presence. Jake knew it was stupid grief talking; he didn't believe in ghosts or souls that lasted an instant past death, and he still doesn't. But filled up with grief like he is now, he expects to feel Winnie sitting beside him. He deserves the illusion, the false comfort, and when it doesn't come, he gets furious all over again. Maybe he's not miserable enough. Is that it? And then he pushes the big diesel until he's doing ninety, and the pickup rattles and dances, and he looks out the passenger window, eyes staring, watching their bluffs passing to the south.

Three turns puts him home again. He means to change out of his suit and tie, but suddenly he doesn't have the energy. Ten or twenty minutes of sitting, thinking about nothing, does nothing for him. So he makes himself stand, crossing the tiny living room of that awful little trailer, aiming for the bedroom but turning instead, heading out the screen door with his brown suit still on, and his good shoes, and that bright big tie that Winnie bought for him some five or six Christmases back.

He feels as if he's watching himself from far off. Both of his bulldozers are parked nearby. The old John Deere and the new D6 Cat. He climbs into the Cat and cranks the engine, letting it warm for maybe a minute before he starts, knowing where he's heading but knowing it as if it's something that he's read somewhere. He feels far away and cold and sure. Arriving at the place, he drops the huge steel blade, and he pushes. Loess soil is soft by nature, easily dislodged and shoved around, and the job takes about

three minutes. Then with the root cellar covered and that old staircase collapsed, he finds a threadbare curiosity, wondering what important treasures got buried in that goddamn hole.

He doesn't care. He realizes that he doesn't, and better than that, he feels something that might be confused for satisfaction. His instinctive need for motion, for work, has been fed. He can head home again, coming across the gray faces of the new foundation, and the easiest thing in the world is to change directions, climbing up and around and coming at the concrete from the safest angle, tearing into the wall and cursing under his breath when it refuses to shatter with a hard nudge. Jake stops long enough to consider the surrounding ground, and then he backs up and comes around and attacks from underneath, beneath what would have been the bedroom windows. A dull crack announces the collapse of the wall. Then he drives through and slams hard into the opposite wall, and it splits and then hangs there long enough to let him back away before it tumbles. Then he drops the other walls from outside, making a neat pile of slabs and dust that lets itself be covered with the floury brown soil that paints Jake's face and suit and the scuffed black leather of his shoes.

He keeps working, breaking up the surrounding sod and pushing the ground beneath it, transforming the shape and appearance of better than half an acre. Then it's too dark to see, and he staggers into the trailer and eats a cold can of spaghetti and strips and busts open a package of Oreos, barely eating one before falling into bed, trying to think about Winnie but finding nothing left of her lurking in his head. So he lets his thoughts drift, discovering a clean and vivid awareness waiting, knowing what needs to be done, and how he can do it tomorrow and through the long days still coming.

Dirt is a simple thing, and reliable, and the simplest, finest dirt is loess. Violent winds carried it here during the dry centuries at the end of the Ice Age. Loess is an obedient, compliant soil that welcomes the chance to be cut and carried, pushed where it is needed, and then piled high and packed with the hard churning treads of the Cat. But driving a big Cat is not easy work for most people. Even a natural talent, someone like Jake, requires years of practice and sloppy mistakes before the hands know how to move, steering the Cat where it needs to be. Before the feet know how

to let up on the pedal, borrowing just enough of the big diesel's muscle to keep things moving but under control. Before the mind always knows what the simple brown earth is doing on the other side of that tall steel blade, even when the sun-scorched eye can see none of it.

People are the complicated ones. They seem compelled to bother him with questions and opinions and barbed comments. It's the usual gang at the Gas 'N Shop, and it's the clients whose work isn't getting done as fast as they'd like, and then it's those assholes with the checkbooks who come out to Jake's to buy what he doesn't need anymore. They want Winnie's dump truck and her little pickup and that tractor that he bought for haying. Plus there's an assortment of half-built and half-demolished machinery — the treasures that he was planning to fix up or tear down for parts. He's brought them up here from their old house. All that he demands is a fair price; that's what he tells everyone. But no, everyone wants to change the subject. They'll stand outside the trailer door, eyes walking along the torn-up hillside, and they'll ask him, "So what exactly are you doing here?" Everyone wants to buy time, hoping they can nudge Jake's price down by outwaiting him. "It's quite a project you've got here," they will admit, making it sound like a compliment. Then when he refuses to answer, they nod and fidget, pulling their eyes off the raw dirt, saying, "You're terracing your land. That's what people are saying."

"The price stays," Jake tells them. "You know it's fair enough. So don't even think about dicking me."

His attitude is offensive. Alarming, even. But these men have been forewarned. The county is buzzing about Jake, everyone offering a favorite theory, and most of the theories sounding the same as the rest. Prospective buyers don't come here expecting to find a sober, sane man. Which means that they must really want what he's selling, and they're in no mood to war over pennies. It's better to crack open the checkbook and fill it out fast, and then claim their prize and run for safety. That's what Jake wants them to think. He stares at each of them, and waits, and only the bravest few clear their throats, pushing up the courage to say, "It doesn't make sense. I mean, if you're terracing your land...well, then...why haven't you built any real terraces...?"

"It's a fair price," Jake will say again. Staring without blinking.

Which always rattles them. There is something in his voice, in his

eyes — a quality new to him and invisible to him — that makes the bravest man panic. The checks are ripped loose and handed over, and regardless of the amount, Jake says, "This'd better be worth what it says. Because if it isn't...."

Then he lets his new voice trail away.

Nobody wants Jake's help with the loading. Which is fine. He can return to his work, and the assholes will load up their treasures themselves, and after a little while, he will see them vanishing up the long, half-finished driveway, leaving a tail of dust that mixes with Jake's cloud of dust, everything swirling together in the warm spring wind.

Maybe he has gone crazy. That's the general consensus, and Jake has never been one to doubt the wisdom of men gossiping over coffee. But if this is insanity, then it's a hard, keen thing that everyone should experience. It feels as if he has tapped into a well of energy, and it bubbles up under pressure. It feeds him. It lifts him. It makes his sleep light and efficient, waking him before dawn, no trace of grogginess in his step. When he eats, he eats quickly and as cheaply as he can manage. Canned foods and cheap cookies are his staples, and it doesn't matter what time of day. Instead of sugary pop, he drinks the water from the shallow old well. Chilled or warm, it tastes foul. But he doesn't need anything else. And the pounds that Winnie used to nag him about have turned to motion and moved earth and wiry muscles wrapped around a simple nervous energy.

Jake isn't happy. He doesn't pretend to feel anything that resembles joy or pleasure or even grim satisfaction. But he isn't unhappy, at least not in any normal sad way. And he does manage to function. His business is smaller without Winnie, but he has retained the fattest of his old clients. Plus there's a little stockpile that was Winnie's retirement fund. Jake can pick the days when he works for money. He likes jobs that can be done in the rain, since he doesn't dare ride his Cat down his own muddy hillsides. And there's more money from selling topsoil that he won't ever need. For the first few months, he trucks it up to the mouth of his driveway, selling it to city gardeners who don't know better. Peeled off an old pasture, the earth lacks humus for growing good tomatoes. But still, he takes their dollars, in cash, and that goes toward paying off the bank, which lets him peel up and sell even more of the goddamn hillside.

But then it's summer, and he's working too far from the driveway to

make trucking the soil worthwhile. When he needs to remove topsoil, he dumps it on the river bottom, slowly and methodically building a new hill pressed snug against the stripped old hills. That's what he's doing one blistering afternoon when he spies a familiar figure walking toward him. He shoves at the soil and takes his Cat over the new surface, pressing it down while he shapes it. Then he climbs down and says, "What?" to his brother.

"Hey, Jake," says Morgan, with a mixture of wariness and pity, and anger. "It's been a while."

Jake doesn't reply. Except to agree, what can he say?

"You didn't make it to Mom's birthday," his brother has to tell him.

"Yeah, well. Things came up."

"Yeah." Morgan looks ready to weep. Or maybe scream. Either way, he has to work with his face, finding the right expression before saying, "Anyway. Mom asked me to come out and check on you."

Jake wipes at his face with an oily bandanna.

As if there's a gun to his head, Morgan grimaces. "She sent you a care package," he says with a tight little voice.

"Yeah?"

"She made me bring it. It's a box up in my car, if you want it."

Jake doesn't want to play this game all afternoon. So he says, "Okay," just to get things over with.

They ride up the hill in Jake's dump truck. Morgan doesn't ask questions, but he's got them. His staring eyes say as much. He watches the worked-over earth and notices the uprooted cedars piled to the east, covering that end of Jake's property, and he almost asks everything. He looks tired and scared and sorry. He holds tight to the door handle as the truck climbs over a smooth ridge that didn't exist last week, and he glances over at his younger brother, clearing his throat before saying nothing but, "It's good seeing you."

Jake rolls his shoulders, saying, "I guess."

Which puts a good chill on everything. Jake parks and climbs down. Morgan retrieves a big cardboard box that is filled with Mom's canned fruits and tomatoes, following him up to the trailer. The ceiling fan is turning fast and swaying, working as hard as it can to move the stale dark air. For the first time in a long while, Jake is aware of the clutter. The

empty cans of stew and spaghetti. The trash sacks filled to bursting. The ceaseless black buzz of flies. He anticipates sad words. An argument, even. If it's not a fight about the way that he's living, then it will be questions about his sanity or lack of it. But no, Morgan just sets the box on the last little bit of free counter space, squinting at a certain photograph hung on the wall. His mouth hangs open, and then he says, "I forgot. How pretty she was."

He means Winnie. Jake looks at the same photograph, framed and overly colorful in that phony, portrait fashion. She had it taken at Wal-Mart as a cheap birthday gift for him. When did he last look at the picture? He can't remember. And Morgan's right. She is beautiful, smiling out at him, wearing a summery dress that shows off her legs and her cleavage and that narrow sweet waist that he can almost feel when he lets his hands remember.

Something grabs him by the throat here.

No, he shakes it off. Gets rid of it. Then he turns to Morgan, saying, "I've got to get back at it."

"Back at what?" his brother asks. Blurts.

Jake hears him, and doesn't.

Morgan says, "I'm asking. What in hell are you doing out here?"

Jake picks up a jar of pale tomatoes, watching the seeds and meat floating lazily inside their thick salty liquid.

"You're angry," Morgan offers. "That's natural. You're pissed at this place...because it killed her...and now you're ripping up the ground just to get even...."

Jake glances at him. "Is that what you think?"

Morgan's hands make tight little fists. His eyes jump from Winnie's picture to his little brother, and then back again.

Then Jake nods and starts for the door, saying, "Maybe you're right." Just to shut him up. "Maybe that's how it is."

There is no such creature as a buried treasure, either on Jake's tilted land or anywhere else in the world. Value comes only once the precious object is unearthed, held close and carefully appraised. Anything hidden by an inch of dust or buried beneath a solid black mile of stone is useless, existing as nothing but conjecture and hypothesis right up until the steel

wrenches it free, letting it feel the dry heat of sun and the soggy heat of blood.

In the course of the days, dozens of little treasures catch Jake's eye. He can't count all the bison skulls, most of which have been shattered by the Cat's slicing blade — impossible puzzles of white bone shards and worn teeth and the black sheaths of old horn. But there are larger, harder objects that shrug off the abuse. Teeth as big as melons occasionally roll out from the churning earth, each yellow and massive, their working faces covered with an intricate network of canyons and valleys. These are mammoth teeth, each one twice as old as civilization. Jake won't stop for much, but he will climb off the Cat to recover a good tooth, keeping his growing collection in a neat row that stretches across his bedroom floor. He also finds a shiny-faced stone that his second-hand geology book identifies as a rare and valuable meteorite. He likes the stone's look and its slick, immortal feel. In an earlier day, he would have sold the meteorite and every tooth to the highest bidder; but today, for reasons that don't quite announce themselves, Jake can't even consider the possibility.

There are enough pennies for what he wants to do here. What is scarce is time, which is why he quits working for hire by mid-August, using every moment of daylight and the moonlit nights, too. Then by late September, there isn't enough day to accomplish everything, which is why Jake rigs up a system of headlights, working with them as well as with his near-perfect memory for the land's shape.

People watch him at night. In the day, too. But he notices them best in the darkness. He sees the headlights of the cars parked on the distant highway or on the bluffs adjacent to his property line. Curious locals are keeping tabs on his progress, making their hopeless guesses about his mysterious goals. On occasion, usually at night, teenagers sneak past the barbed wire marking his property line. Usually there are two or three or four of them, all males, and this is a game and an adventure, and Jake mostly ignores them. The only harm they can manage is to waste his time. But if they creep too close to where he's working, or if they look as if they'll monkey around with his machinery...well, he turns the Cat and chases them back where they came from, the steel treads groaning and screeching as he climbs the hill, moving just fast enough to almost, almost catch those panicky bastards.

Not everyone is so easy to scare. In October, on a bright warm afternoon, Jake notices a farmer harvesting his corn out on the river bottom. The man is riding back and forth on his fancy combine. When Jake looks again, he notices that the combine has stopped and nobody is sitting in the cab. Then he starts pushing a few dozen tons of soft earth into a convenient gully, and he notices nothing else. The farmer walks up the same ridge. He's a sturdy, low-built man, past his prime but still strong. Still capable. And he must be furious. That's what Jake thinks when he finally looks back over a shoulder, backing down the gouged and flattened ridge, expecting nobody and seeing nobody until some dim little voice warns him, and he looks again. Looks, blinks. Stops the Cat, and locks the brakes, and turns around in his battered seat, watching the farmer marching toward him.

"Get down," his neighbor shouts.

Jake knows better. He gives his head a little shake, saying nothing.

"Haven't you got it?" the farmer asks him. "The court order. Have you even looked at it?"

There have been legal snarls and tongue-talking, but that's why Jake has a lawyer. He can say with a perfect honesty, "I don't remember." The diesel is still running, meaning that the men have to shout to be heard. "What's this order about?"

"You can't keep doing this," the farmer tells him.

"Doing what?" Jake asks.

"Shit, if I knew that...!" The farmer's hands lift high, and then fall to his sides again. "You're making a damned mess here. You see? When it rains hard, the first time, I'm going have mud instead of a cornfield. Is that what you want? To goddamn ruin me?"

Jake can tell him, "No," with ease. Then he adds, "But it's been dry now. Since last June, really — "

"It's going to rain," the man interrupts.

Jake makes a show of shrugging his shoulders, then screams back at him, "It won't move much. I'm packing it down good — "

"It's going to pour," says the farmer, flinging his hands up again. "You can't tell me it won't someday, and you can't tell the judge that you can stop it from happening. So you damn well better stop this...this bullshit...!"

Jake needs to work again. The westernmost acres are waiting, those

last bluffs lower and steeper than everything before. He stares out over the ugly brown grass, planning what he needs to do first and next and after that too, the quiet smart little part of him effortlessly predicting exactly how much time it will take. He nearly forgets about the farmer. Then a clod of dry earth hits him above the right ear, and the trailing voice says, "Listen to me, goddamn it!"

Without a backward glance, Jake releases the brake and picks up the blade and turns and lets the slope as well as the diesel carry him along, rapidly gaining speed. The stocky farmer is ahead of him, and running. He looks frantic and slow, the stubby legs working and the arms pumping uselessly. And then Jake can't see the man beyond the nose of Cat. He is a hypothesis, an abstraction. Maybe he doesn't even exist anymore. A seductive possibility, that. Then Jake lets intuition tell him when to depress the pedal, stopping himself just enough, just at the last possible moment...and after a little while longer, he spies the farmer down on his own land again, staggering more than running now, twice stumbling forward into the twisted brown ruins of his corn.

THEY'LL COME BY the trailer while he's at the far end of his land, working. His mother and brother, and maybe half a dozen friends, leave care packages and little notes written on the spot and long letters on good stationery neatly folded, his name in big shouting letters. They are concerned for him. They are worried and puzzled, and some of them admit to being angry with his behavior, and everyone begs him to seek help, asking him why can't he just listen to reason.

What Jake listens to is nobody's business but his own. What he wants is too large and far too consuming to let words or misspent kindness distract him. That's what he knows, standing beside the kitchen counter, eating sweet peaches out of a wide-mouthed jar and drinking up the juice, then wiping his whiskered mouth dry with the filthy sleeve of his coat. It is November now. The weather has turned raw and cold, an ominous dampness hanging over everything. He folds the latest note and lets it glide to the floor, then he wanders into the bedroom, stepping over the low wall of mammoth teeth and sitting on the edge of his unmade bed, realizing that he is far too tired ever to stand again. A tall cheap mirror

hangs on the opposite wall. Winnie hung it there, and she used to pose before it, wearing nice clothes or wearing nothing at all. Jake glances at the mirror, seeing himself. His hair is long and his face is gaunt and his hands are nothing but bone over which is pulled a thin red skin. His coat and oily trousers hang limp on his shriveled body. But worst of all are his staring, mad-dog eyes. The eyes scare him enough that he closes them for a long moment, taking long deep breaths. Then he looks again, seeing Winnie posing from inside the mirror, her little hands riding her bare hips and her expression warning him that she's a long way from happy.

Jake stands, somehow. He stands and breathes again, then walks out into the failing late-day light of November. The Cat needs fuel. But the tank in the back of his pickup is empty, and there aren't two gallons left in the big tank behind the trailer. A quick search of his pockets finds no cash, and he seems to remember that his bank account is empty, too. But there is money. There's a last little gasp of dollars in Winnie's retirement fund. Except this is a Saturday, Jake discovers. He stares at his watch, realizing that the bank is closed and will remain closed until Monday. No, that's Veteran's Day. He won't be able to get what belongs to him until Tuesday, and that's a long ways from being soon enough.

Jake drives to town. The pickup runs rough, stalling out at the first light and pretending that it won't start after that. But he cranks until the engine kicks its throat clear enough to run. Then he leaves it running at the Gas 'N Shop. In the near-darkness, he starts pumping fuel oil into the big tank, and he walks into the bright clean lights. The girl at the counter is new to him. Good. She stares and says nothing, even when Jake says, "Hello," as he passes by. He fills his deep pockets with jerky and dried apricots. As a treat, he takes a cold Dew from behind the glass door. Then he makes a show of patting his trouser pockets, telling the girl, "My wallet's in the car. Be right back."

The big tank is halfway filled. That's enough, easily. Jake shuts off the pump and climbs into the warm cab, pulling away exactly as he's done for twenty-plus years. Too tired to think, he forgets to watch his mirrors for the sheriff. But nobody is chasing him, and before it's eight o'clock, he's back up on the big Cat, working those last few acres of steep ground.

He sleeps for moments, dreaming intense and wild, twisted dreams. But the cold always wakes him, and he sits up in his seat again, shoving

another cylinder of jerky into his mouth, taking a deep swig of well water from the gallon milk jug sitting between his feet, and then chewing the salty meat as he picks his next swipe, navigating with headlights and his increasingly soggy memory. By morning, he can imagine being finished. At midday, he parks on the last high ridge and climbs out, gazing down at a surviving patch of brome and cedar. How did he want to do this part? He must know, but he can't remember now. Bewilderment moves into a simple rage, and he discovers that he is crying, and maybe he has been for a long while. His face is soaked and cold in the sharp north wind. He wipes it and wipes it, then gives up. He lets himself cry. He collapses where he stands and closes his eyes, and maybe he sleeps, or maybe it's something other than sleep. Either way, when his eyes pull open, he remembers. The rest of it. This is how he will do it.

The cedars put up a fight, but he mows all of them down and covers them over with raw earth. Then he makes a series of long curved gouges that he has to cut more than once before they look pretty much right. And by then, night is falling again. He has half a thousand little jobs left waiting, but every job is delicate and separated in space from the others, and the Cat won't help him. So he navigates down to the bottoms and cuts the headlights and sets the machine free, pointed toward the trees that mark the river. Alone, the big machine chugs its way forward, vanishing into the gloom. If he hears it tumble and crash into the channel, the sound doesn't register. Jake is walking back toward his pickup, and that's when he notices new lights that don't belong there. Headlights seem to carry voices with them. A name is called out. His name. Jake doesn't listen well enough to recognize any one voice. What he does is walk quickly toward the east, sensing that they haven't seen him and won't, if he's careful. A quarter section is a lot of land, particularly when you've shaped every inch of it yourself.

Half a mile east is a tangle of dead cedars. Jake laid them out with care, forming a dense tangle of interwoven branches and rusty red needles. That's where he hides. He climbs inside the tangle, feeling warmer by the moment, and he eats the last of his dried apricots and drinks the two last swallows of water from the milk jug, and he closes his eyes sometime later, and sleeps, and he sleeps without being bothered by dreams, hours passing in a blink.

Then a hand touches his shoulder, and he wakes with a start. And Morgan says quietly, firmly, "Come on out now. It's over."

Maybe it is done now. Jake can't believe that it is or ever can be, but that dangling hope urges him to climb out of the dead little forest. A light snow is falling. The first snow of winter. It lends a hush to the various men standing uphill from him. There's the sheriff and a couple deputies, and between them is a hound dog who couldn't seem more pleased with itself. It greets Jake by wagging its stubby tail. Jake offers his hand, asking the sheriff, "Is it the fuel? Is that why?"

One of the deputies starts to answer, but Morgan cuts him off. He clamps a hand on Jake's shoulder, saying, "You're going to behave, right? You aren't going to do anything stupid?"

Jake glances at him.

Morgan says, "No cuffs," to the sheriff. "Please."

The sheriff drives a boxy Jeep. Cautious to a fault, it takes him what seems like hours to reach the empty trailer. "All this work," he keeps saying. "God, what were you thinking, Jake?"

The ground is wearing a thin inch of new snow. Except where the dead cedars poke up through the snow, of course.

"What were you trying to prove? Can you tell me that?"

Jake sits between deputies. When he leans forward, everyone is nervous. Morgan is up front, and he jerks as if startled. The deputies get ready to grab their prisoner, and if need be, strike him. But then he peers out the windshield, remarking with the calmest voice possible, "It looks like the sun's breaking out."

The little snow is finished. The cold north wind is dry and cleansing, pushing away the last of the clouds before they reach the highway. They turn in the direction of town, but that means nothing. Maybe he's going to jail, but there's also a hospital up in Lincoln where people can find special help. Jake doesn't ask about their destination. He couldn't care less. Again, he shuts his eyes, expecting to sleep; but this time the sheriff barks out, "What in hell?" as he hits the brakes.

Even on a Veteran's Day, the highway carries a fair amount of traffic. And most of the traffic has pulled off to either shoulder, people standing in the chill wind, cold hands pointing south, moving side to side as if drawing the same curving figures in the air.

One of the deputies says, "Oh god."

Morgan makes a low grunt, and then looks back at his brother, trying to speak and finding no breath in him.

"Do you see it — ?" the deputy starts to ask.

The sheriff says, "Now I do."

He pulls across the far lane and parks on the wide shoulder, the cherry tops flashing as he climbs down. Everyone climbs down, forgetting all about Jake. He's left to himself, slipping out into the suddenly bright sunshine, miles of fresh snow making him blink, making his tired eyes tear up.

A strange woman standing nearby points and says, "What's the hair? What makes it?"

"I don't know," says the man next to her.

A group of teenage boys are past them. Laughing, one of the boys says, "Look at that tit! Isn't it a beauty?"

"It is," a deputy agrees.

Morgan looks at Jake. Looks at him, and then he stares south at the long white hillside. Dead cedars are clustered up at one end, looking red and shaggy. A second patch of cedars — a small red mound — caps the end of the rounded hill that Jake built months ago. That hill is white with the snow. White and smooth, and perfect. Then comes the third patch of cedars in the middle of the reshaped bluffs. Triangular. Tucked closely between a slope that rises on a curve, and then rises again on a matching curve.

"Just like legs," says Morgan.

Jake is standing beside him, staring like everyone.

"And knees. And look, feet!" His brother practically giggles, his eyes sweeping back toward the east end of the property. "And her hair, and face. Just right. That's Winnie! You did the face just right."

Jake stares at where Morgan is staring.

"I couldn't see her before. When she was just bare dirt." Morgan can't stop shaking his head in astonishment. He has to touch Jake on the shoulder, asking, "What is she doing there? Sleeping?"

The sheriff says, "That's what it looks like. Sleeping naked."

"Christ," says a deputy. "Is she ever beautiful?"

"Jake," says Morgan. "Jake? What are you thinking?"

"I don't know," he admits.

"Aren't you proud? You've got to be proud!" Morgan laughs now, tears leaking free of his blinking eyes. "It's Winnie out there!"

Jake shrugs his shoulders.

Then with a quiet and firm, almost indifferent voice, he tells everyone, "I don't know. I'm looking, but I can't see her."



Footnote

from *The Official Guide to Time Travel*

By Robert Frazier

believe that I have truly been there
shuddered across flux barriers
and it's not pure speed but
the complete utter lack
that sets you adrift
through possibilities
and it's not line
but becoming
the still point
the white event
that matters
as if all that
attenuation
achieves
anything
anyhow



PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Games Writers Play

"Those who like to exercise their minds with crossword puzzles can now do so doubly. Bantam Books is publishing a series of murder mysteries by Parnell Hall in which a female crossword constructor is a main character, with some of the clues in crossword."

—Martin Arnold, "Making Books," *The New York Times*, February 8, 2001.

I APPROACHED the door of Ludic Literary Productions with some trepidation. I didn't really want to be here, but I had no choice in the matter. My last book — a mystery novel titled *The Burglar in the Pergola*, and issued without any gaming support — had tanked. My publisher, Hasbro-Knopf-Sega, had insisted that my next book be released with complete "interactivity," or it wouldn't be printed at all. I forebore from asking how much more "interactive" I could get than the tradi-

tional, ages-old process of having another human being interpret the words I had written, and instead headed straight for the offices of this middleman-packager, Chester "Checkers" Ludic.

Once seated in Ludic's inner office, I sought to compose myself, vowing to listen objectively and non-emotionally to Ludic's sales-pitch. The man himself possessed an appearance that was reassuring enough. A roly-poly, tuft-haired, sharp-nosed chap, clad in a plaid vest and checkered pants, he resembled no one so much as Superman's silliest Golden Age foe, the Toyman.

"Welcome, welcome, it's so good to see you, Mr. Di Fallopien. I've already brought myself up to speed on your novels, and feel that your talents will synergize nicely with many of our programs here. Let me begin by saying that I see you as a board game."

"A board game?"

Ludic held up a placatory hand.

"Oh, I know, it's a bit old-fashioned. But so are your books. And the board game is eternal. Every generation discovers it anew. Do I have to quote the latest sales figures on standard Monopoly and its many fine regional variations to make my point?"

"I — I guess not. Please continue."

"I've already taken the liberty of having our design department construct a few prototypes for your inspection. Now of course at this stage, we've labeled them with pre-branded names. But your game-novel will of course bear its own title."

Ludic reached down a construction from the shelf behind him and unfolded it across his broad desk.

"This is the Risk version of your novel. Exciting geopolitical thrills, combined with your page-turning thriller! Each player begins the game with a set number of random pages from your book, distributed across his various countries in place of armies. With each roll of the dice, each 'battle,' pages change hands. And every time any player conquers a country, he assumes the remaining pages associated with that nation. The ultimate winner of the game finishes with a substantial portion of your novel in hand, pages which he may then use in

future games. Multiple playings, of course, are required to complete the novel."

Ludic sat back with a self-satisfied air. I could hardly choose my first question out of all the many troubling ones that arose. But finally I asked, "And when do these jolly game players find the time actually to read my book?"

"Now, now, Mr. Di Fallopian, don't assume the worst. Why, the purchaser *could* read your novel immediately upon opening the box, if he or she wanted. It's all included, of course, beneath the shrink-wrap, on laminated sheets for easy cleaning. People do tend to snack heavily during these play experiences. But of course, no one will immediately jump to the straight text. People nowadays want a challenging play experience to precede their literary one. They'll get to your text in due time, I assure you."

I had my doubts about that, but could only say, "What's the next option?"

Ludic put away the first game and displayed another. "Here's the Clue version of your prose. Perhaps a tad too predictable for a mystery novel, but the public likes reassuring formats. The cast of perpetrators mirrors your own cast of characters, just as the game board mimics

your setting. I'd advise you to keep your locales simple, or the lithographing costs can shoot through the roof. In any case, every round of the game brings us up to another plot-point in your book. Our test audience, by the way, reveals that they prefer at least a dozen murders to achieve satisfactory play."

"No, no, this just won't do!"

"Well, here's the Monopoly version. Your novel is printed on the Community Chest cards — "

"No!"

"In the Life format, each career milestone completes a chapter of your — "

"No!"

"Battleship — "

"Argh!"

"Operation — "

I carefully cradled my head in my hands and began to weep. Ludic came around his desk to comfort me.

"Sorry — "

I jolted upright. "Don't mention another goddamn game!"

"Checkers" hastened back around to the refuge of his desk and waited until I had ceased seething before speaking.

"Mr. Di Fallopian, apparently you regard board games as too low-brow and frivolous a vehicle for your exalted prose. You seem to demand something daring and dramatic. Therefore, I am not even going to try to interest you in many of our other fine programs, such as the Carousel, where riders on festive wooden ponies snatch pages of your novel instead of brass rings as they whirl gaily around. Or the Flag Football experience, where pages are plucked from the butts of the rival team. Instead, I am going to do something I very rarely do."

Ludic opened a desk drawer and took out a revolver. He examined the chambers, spun the barrel, then placed it on the desk before me.

"Mr. Di Fallopian — allow me to present your book as Russian Roulette!"



Although he has written about a variety of exotic locales—Borneo, Russia, and the insides of a gigantic dragon, to name just three—Lucius Shepard seems to have the strongest affinity for Central America. Much of his finest work in the 1980s, such as his novel Life During Wartime, was set in places real and otherwise along the isthmus between the two American continents. Shepard's kinship with the magic realist writers of Latin America is strong, as is evident in this new story, a tale of lizards and loyalties that features one of the more distinctive characters we've seen in some time.

The Drive-in Puerto Rico

By Lucius Shepard

THINGS WENT WELL FOR Colonel Galpa after the war. Indeed, they went so well that wherever he traveled he became the object of a

celebration. Whether in the north of the country with its gloomy mountain villages, or in the volcanic central region, or in the jungles along the coast, his arrival was a signal for the townspeople to set aside their daily concerns and honor the national spirit that had produced such a remarkable hero. For ten years he rarely passed a night without a splendid hotel room, a surfeit of food and drink, and a beautiful woman for a companion, these the gifts of a grateful citizenry offered in tribute to the defining act of his heroism, the shooting down of three enemy jets during the single air battle of the war with Temalagua. Sometimes upon learning the specifics of the colonel's heroism, strangers might suggest that a tally of three was insufficient to warrant such prolonged reverence; but their judgment failed to take into account the fact that the country was small, with a tradition poor in heroes (unmartyred ones, at any rate), and when viewed in this light, Colonel Galpa's hour in the sky assumed Herculean proportions.

At one point nearly a dozen years after his moment of glory, the colonel returned to his parents' home in San Pedro Sula, intending to settle there and assist his father in running the family flour mill. The mill was in financial straits, yet this was not Colonel Galpa's sole motive for returning. He was weary of parties, of boring speeches and floral tributes offered by schoolgirls; he wanted a family of his own, and friends. The ordinary consolations of an ordinary life. But at the time the government was undergoing a crisis of confidence, and by promising that certain valuable contracts would be awarded to his father, the leaders of the party in power persuaded him to go back out onto the road so as to remind the people of their one actual achievement: the winning of a back-fence war. In truth, there were many — notably the owners of the bars and clubs and hotels frequented by the colonel — who would have been happier had he remained in San Pedro. Like the colonel, albeit for more venal reasons, they had reached the conclusion that enough was enough, and they frequently expressed the opinion that the colonel's heroism must have been an aberration, that he was at heart a freeloader; yet none dared to voice such complaints in public, where they might have had some effect, and so, despite this attendant irony, due in large part to politics and inertia — estates often confused for one another — the colonel continued on his joyless rounds.

On occasion someone unacquainted with the colonel would ask the identity of the slender graying man with the complexion of an *Indio puro* sitting quietly in a secluded corner of a noisy party, and when they were told this was the famous Mauricio Galpa, they might say, What curious behavior for the guest of honor! Oh, the colonel's simply tired, would be the response. Or the colonel's got a touch of dysentery. Or perhaps the person to whom the comment had been directed would make a fist with his thumb extended and put the thumb to his lips, implying that the colonel had overindulged in drink. But the reality of the situation was that while Colonel Galpa had once exulted in his good fortune and availed himself of every pleasurable opportunity, he had come to the conclusion that there was something ghoulish about these quasi-ritualistic bacchanals inspired by the deaths of three men whose faces he had never seen. He felt a certain disquiet regarding his fame and had taken to remembering the three men in his prayers; but since he was not a particularly religious

sort, this merely exacerbated his emotional state and caused him to think of himself as a hypocrite.

In August of the millennial year, as he had done for the previous nineteen years, Colonel Galpa traveled to Puerto Morada on the Caribbean coast. Each August, bureaucrats from the capital who could not afford better would swarm into the town to take their vacations — vacations in name only, because they spent their days sitting on the porches of the little hotels along the beach, typing reports commissioned by their superiors who had fled to Cannes or Majorca or Buenos Aires to escape the heat. With the bureaucrats came the whores, hundreds of them from every corner of the country, and following the whores came the journalists, both groups seeking a drunken bureaucrat from whom they could extort something of value. From the government's perspective, August in Puerto Morada was the perfect showcase for the colonel. There were any number of gatherings at which he might be feted, and usually one or two unoccupied journalists could be persuaded to feature him in a nostalgia piece. For these exact same reasons Colonel Galpa loathed visiting the town and always managed to arrive late at night when no one was likely to notice him.

The hotel where the colonel stayed each August was a venerable two-story colonial of white stucco with a red tile roof, shaded by bougainvilleas and palms. When he had first checked in nineteen years before he had been given a fine bedchamber and sitting room overlooking the beach; these days, however, he chose to occupy the smallest room on the ground floor facing inland. This was not a consequence of his diminished status, but due to the fact that it housed a considerable population of lizards, many of which crawled in over the palmetto fronds that drooped through the window. Wherever he spent the night, be it Puerto Morada or the capital or a village in the Miskitia, the colonel enjoyed sitting on his bed with a single lamp lit and watching the lizards that clung to the walls, their bright sides pulsing with breath. He had no scholarly interest in them; he could barely tell a skink from a chameleon. He liked them because they decorated his solitude without disturbing it. Over the years he had developed a peculiar affinity with them. When he entered the room they neither froze nor kept their distance as they might in the presence of another human being, but instead perched on his nightstand and ran

across his feet and otherwise continued on their tremulous mosquito hunts. Though he was a practical man who rejected the animist traditions of his forefathers, he allowed himself to flirt with the notion that lizards might be spiritual functionaries whose purpose was to oversee the travels of those fated to be exiles in the country of their birth.

On this particular evening Colonel Galpa's attention was captivated by a large indigo lizard with delicate black markings on its face that from several feet away resembled the fanciful mask of a harlequin. When he examined it at close range, bending so that his head was level with its own, it stared back at him, unblinking and serene, its pupils expanding to cover nearly all the retinal surfaces, so that the eyes resembled tiny orange suns in total eclipse. He derived from the stare a startling sense of energy and presence, its intensity such one might receive from looking into the eyes of a child. Though he assumed this to be a misapprehension, the result of fatigue, the longer he regarded the lizard, the sharper this impression became.

"Who are you?" he asked playfully.

The lizard craned its neck toward him, and the colonel felt as if a hook had snagged in the silk of his soul and were tugging gently, seeking to draw him forth, like a thread drawn through the eye of a needle. Dizzy, he straightened and felt instantly steadier. Still curious, he bent again to the lizard, and again was possessed by the sense that he was in danger of spilling out of his body. A check-up, he thought, might be in order. The dizziness could be a symptom of some difficulty with the inner ear. With a last glance at the lizard, he switched off the light and got into bed, where he lay awake for a while watching the frilly shadow of a palmetto frond nodding on the white sheets. The idle churning of his thoughts dredged up recent memories, trivial plans, old preoccupations. He recalled a woman with whom he had danced in Trujillo; he decided that after breakfast he would return to his room and unplug his phone; and he saw a sectioned-off panel of deep blue sky, sunlight dazzling the scuffmarks on a plastic canopy, and felt an immense vibration. He closed his eyes against this vision, concentrated on the darkness behind his lids, but did not pray.

In the morning, before even the most zealous of the bureaucrats were awake, Colonel Galpa set forth along the beach, heading for the Drive-in

Puerto Rico. It was his favorite place in Puerto Morada, a bar-restaurant constructed of lime green concrete block, three walls and a metal awning that was rolled down each night to make a fourth, with a service bar and a jukebox inside, a room out back where the owner lived and a wooden deck out front, furnished with red picnic tables where one could sit, shaded by coco palms, and gaze out across the Caribbean. The place had no discernable connection with either drive-ins or Puerto Rico, except for the fact it faced eastward toward that captive island, and thus most people assumed that the name reflected the idiosyncratic nature of its proprietor, Tomás Quu, an elderly Miskitia Indian reputed to be an *hechicero*, one who listened to the spirits and could work small charms. A wizened man with a long gray braid and a face as wrinkled and dark as an avocado pit, he had once been a soldier and had, according to rumor, performed his duty with exceptional valor. On occasion the colonel tried to draw him out on his experiences, but Tomás was not inclined to speak on the subject. That morning the old man was on his knees inside the restaurant, painting a corner of the mural that spread across the rear wall.

This mural, the work of many years, depicted in bright, primitive imagery the history of the country from earliest times — Mayan pyramids and minor conquistadors; Yankee traders and soldiers of fortune, the most famous of whom had been executed in front of Santa Maria del Onda, the cathedral that shadowed the heart of the town; the white ships of the fruit company that had controlled the politics of the region; volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, the great hurricane of 1998, and so on. The thing the colonel liked best about the mural was that his role in history was represented by a tiny gray airplane suspended in a lozenge of turquoise, with no reference to missiles or enemy aircraft. The thing he liked least was that on each successive visit he discovered that Tomás had added horrid details: a young girl curled up around the syringe protruding from her arm; the bodies of several dead children strung up like fish and a man masked by a bandanna standing proudly beside them, his rifle ported. Emblems of the country's recent unfortunate leap into the modern world. To his surprise, the colonel saw that Tomás had painted a lizard on an unexploited section of the wall, in the lower right-hand corner, a lizard very like the specimen that had caught his attention the night before, indigo, with delicate black markings and orange eyes. Beneath the lizard was an uncompleted face,

bearded and pale, with one glaring eye and a sketched-in eyebrow — the space where the second eye should have been was occupied by the lizard's tail. Tomás rarely included the face of a specific man or woman in the mural, yet this had the look of a portrait in progress.

"Oyé, Tomás!" The colonel took a seat on the deck. "*Por favor, un café!*"

The old man glanced toward the colonel and shaded his eyes. He waved and spoke to someone in the shadows. Then he went back to his painting. Soon a barefoot brown-skinned girl wearing an embroidered blouse and a long red skirt brought coffee and a sweet roll, and the colonel sat happily watching combers rolling in from the deep green swells beyond Punta Manabique, regarding the palm-lined ochre curve of the beach and the town set along it, the stucco and tile of the tourist places, the grim eminence of the cathedral thrusting up from the central plaza, and the rusted tin roofs of Barrio Clarín, in front of which a small herd of piebald cows had strayed onto the sand and were nudging at mounds of seaweed in hopes of uncovering something edible.

When Tomás quit work on the mural he joined the colonel at his table and the colonel told him that he had recently seen a lizard resembling the one in the mural.

"How odd," said Tomás. "For there are no such lizards. It is a magical creature born in the imagination."

"My imagination...or yours?"

"We are of the same blood. Our imaginations sing the same song. What is in my mind lives also in yours, needing only to be awakened."

"Well, there is at least one flesh-and-blood lizard. I saw it clinging to the wall of my room last night."

"One is very like none," Tomás said. "There is only the slightest difference between these values. The difference between the ordinary and the magical. It is easy to mistake the two."

The colonel decided that Tomás was playing with him, let the subject drop, and asked who the half-completed face was intended to represent.

"Satán." Tomás spat over the railing to indicate distaste.

"So...." The colonel leaned back and tilted his face to the sun. "Satan is a gringo, eh?"

"Pale, yes. A gringo, no," said Tomás. "But like you he is a colonel."

Colonel Galpa saw that the old man was not joking and asked him to explain.

"Surely you have heard of him?" Tomás asked, and when the colonel said he had not, the old man said, "It is too pleasant a day to speak of such things."

A romantic song, strings and guitars underscoring a passionate tenor, issued from the jukebox inside the restaurant, and the girl who had served them could be seen dancing by herself, her head inclined to one side, holding her long skirt up to her ankles. The sun had risen high enough to illuminate the crates of lime and orange and grape and strawberry soda stacked beside the jukebox, causing the bottles to glow with gemmy brilliance.

"I know what you are thinking," Tomás said. "You are thinking how beautiful women are when they are sad, and how that sadness might give way to something more beautiful yet if a man with the proper respect and temper were to happen along. Be wary, my friend. Let a woman wound you with her sadness, and you will carry that wound until the day of your death."

"When was the last time you were with a woman?" the colonel asked.

The old man squinted at the glittering sea. "It was nineteen eighty-three. The summer the army went up into Olanchito. When all the drug dealers came running out of the mountains, she came with them. She stayed five months." He gave a mournful shake of his head. "Your way is best, my friend. A few days, a week, then *adiós*."

"You're a cynic, Tomás," the colonel said, and Tomás said, "Not at all. I have reached a venerable age and am secure in the things I know. Yet like a fool I fall in love every day. I am merely too old to be a consummate fool. It is you who are the cynic."

"I?" The colonel laughed. "First you accuse me of being a romantic, then a cynic. Surely there is a contradiction involved?"

"Perhaps 'cynic' is not the correct word. Though I can think of no better word for someone so obdurate as to deny the tradition that bred him."

The old man was referring, the colonel knew, to their Indian blood and to his skeptical attitude toward Tomás's mystical bent, his magical

interpretation of the world, a view he believed that Colonel Galpa would do well to adopt.

"Must we always argue about this?" the colonel asked.

"No," said Tomás, giving the colonel's hand a fatherly pat. "I merely find it amusing to do so."

THE COLONEL SPENT the day reading in his room; the telephone rang on several occasions but he did not pick it up. At twilight he lay on his bed and watched the rain-swept peaks in the west darken from gray to a soft purple. Once night had settled over the town, he dressed and went forth to do his duty, to mingle with the whores and journalists and bureaucrats who would be gathered at the Club Atomica, a discotheque on the edge of Barrio Clarín.

By the time he arrived the dance floor was overflowing with a confusion of men and women whose clumsy movements made them appear to be struggling to keep their feet, as if dazed by the flashing lights and deafening music. He found a stool at the end of the bar and ordered a vodka rocks from a pretty girl wearing a mesh blouse through which her breasts were visible. Someone tapped him on the shoulder. On turning he was pleased to see Jerry Gammage, an American journalist whom he found generally agreeable, apart from Gammage's habit of addressing him as "Maury."

"Hey, Maury!" Gammage clapped him on the shoulder. "They still got you out riding the circuit, huh?"

The colonel shrugged as if to say, What else?, and had a sip of his drink. He watched Gammage, a big sloppy blond man in jeans and a faded JUST SAY NO T-shirt, lean across the counter and flirt with the barmaid, making a clownish face when she playfully pushed him away.

"Every fucking year this place gets a little more like Vegas," Gammage said, settling beside the colonel. "It's a damn shame. But what the hell. These are the end times. Can't sweat the small stuff, right?" He clinked glasses with the colonel and drank. Judging by the slackness of his features and the expansiveness of his gestures, Gammage was a good ways along the road to being very drunk.

"Got any hot flashes for me?" Gammage asked, wobbling on his stool. "Any pews that's nit to frint?"

"I saw a manta ray near the point this morning," the colonel said. "It may have been the shadow from a school of mackerel, but I don't think so."

Gammage drank. "I'd love to write it. Beats the hell out of shit like Six Priests Found Murdered With Brains Missing. Wha'cha think about all that, anyway?"

"About what?"

"About Six Priests Found Murdered With Brains Missing." Gammage leaned close, as if inspecting the colonel's face for unsightly flaws. "Aw, man! Where you been? It's the big story out of the capital."

"Six priests were murdered in the capital?"

"And found with their brains missing, no less. If we luck out, we'll get a shot at seeing the man s'posed to be responsible tonight. Word has it he's in town."

"The man who killed them? Why isn't he in jail?"

"Because — " Gammage leaned close again — "he's a fucking hero. Not like you, Maury. This guy's your basic New World Order hero. A specialist in what's being billed as 'internal security.' These honchos don't get the free lunch treatment, but they know the secret handshake. And nobody fucks with 'em." He signaled the barmaid with his empty glass. "I don't know why I'm giving you grief. You're one of the good guys. I'm just tired of this shit. You come to expect it in Salvador, Guatemala, Panama. But somehow I thought this place would be immune."

The colonel thought of the new addition to Tomas's mural. "What is this man's name?" he asked, but Gammage did not appear to have heard.

"Y'know — " he accepted a fresh drink from the barmaid — "I'm ready to become a card-carrying freako. Know what I'm saying? Get my hand mirror, stand out on the desert at noon and heliograph the fucking mother ship."

The colonel was accustomed to Gammage's despairing tone, but this outburst appeared to signal a new and unhealthy level of disillusionment.

"Speak of the devil," said Gammage. "Here's the man of the hour now."

Hector Canizales, the portly owner of the cantina, was pushing his way through the crowd, and in his wake, walking with immense dignity, as if he were the actual owner and Hector merely a flunky, came a pale

heavysset man resplendent in a dark blue uniform that bore a colonel's insignia. He stood a head taller than anyone else in the club; his hair was black and oily, combed straight back from a forehead so high and smooth and white, like a slab of marble, it seemed to warrant an inscription, and his thick eyebrows were so dark by contrast with the pallor of his skin, they appeared more decorative than functional. His face was squarish and had a soft, hand-carved look; his nose was aquiline, his eyes large, set widely apart, and his full mouth put Colonel Galpa in mind of portraits he had seen of the old Spanish court — the mouth of a voluptuary, vaguely predatory and given to expressions of contempt. More to the point, he had no doubt that this was the face Tomás was painting on the wall of the Drive-in Puerto Rico.

"Colonel Mauricio Galpa," said Hector, mopping his brow with a paisley handkerchief. "Allow me to present Colonel Felix Carbonell."

"*Mucho gusto*," said Carbonell, shaking the colonel's hand. "I am honored."

"Wow," said Gammage, gesturing with his drink. "This is fucking massive. The veritable confluence of past and future."

As he stood there enveloped by the overpowering sweetness of Carbonell's cologne, the colonel was mesmerized by his opposite number's face; despite its calm expression and regularity of feature, he derived from it a sense of tension, as if there were another face beneath it, one fiercely animated and straining to shatter the pale mask that held it in check. Though he had never before met the man, he had met with his reputation. The name Carbonell was associated with the worst excesses of the regime. With brutality and terror and slaughter.

"You might even say it's kinda mythical," Gammage went on. "Or do I mean mystical? Whatever. I'm talking the meeting of the twain, y'know. Yin and yang. Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader."

Carbonell's eyes slid toward Gammage.

"I'd love a shot of this." Gammage gave Carbonell a jolly smile. "You do show up in photographs, don'tcha?"

"Excuse me!" A slim brunette in slacks and a white blouse grabbed Gammage by the elbow and yanked him away from the two colonels. "Jerry, I need you over here!"

Carbonell watched them disappear into the crowd; when he turned

back to the colonel, he said. "Drunks, gringos, journalists. The new trinity."

Colonel Galpa felt a gulf between them, as palpable in its own right as he might feel standing at the edge of a deep canyon, struck by a chill vacancy inspired by the thought of a misstep. He pretended to be amused by Carbonell's comment and sipped his vodka.

"Well," Carbonell said after an awkward interval. "It's been a pleasure, Colonel. But if you will pardon me, there is a lady in the back who demands my attention."

They exchanged polite bows, then Carbonell went off with Canizales, who had stood by all the while, toward the rear of the establishment. The colonel finished his vodka and ordered another, wondering how much longer he needed to stay in order to satisfy the requirements of duty. He did not expend a great deal of thought upon Carbonell; he had known other brutal men during his days of service, and though he disapproved of their actions, he had accepted the fact that history seemed to require them. Three drinks, he decided. He would stay for three drinks. Maybe four. Perhaps it would not be too late to call his father.

"Colonel Galpa?" The slim brunette woman who had dragged Gammage off now took the barstool beside him. She was somewhat older than he had thought. Forty, perhaps. Attractive in a quiet way. Framed by her dark hair, her face was kept from being a perfect oval by a longish chin. With her small mouth and large brown eyes, she put him in mind of one of his high school teachers, a pretty, no-nonsense woman who had rarely smiled.

"I'm Margery Emmons," she said. "CNN."

The colonel saw his immediate future. An hour or two under hot lights, questions, a camera, an experience that would ultimately be reduced to a ten-second sound byte. Unpleasant, but it would thrill his nephews.

"I'd like to speak with you about Battalion Three-Sixteen," Margery Emmons said.

That name put a notch in the colonel's expectations and alerted him to danger. "I'm sorry," he told her. "I can't help you."

"You've never heard of Battalion Three-Sixteen?"

"You must realize, Miss Emmons, I've...."

"Margery...please."

"Margery. You must realize that I have not been active in the affairs of my country since the war. Since my war. I am as you see. An exhibit, a public relations opportunity."

"But you must have some knowledge of Three-Sixteen."

"I probably know less than you. I know, of course, that they were closely involved with the contras during the Eighties, taking their orders from the Americans, and that they have been accused of atrocities. That is all I know." The colonel made his delivery more pointed. "As it was your country that commissioned these atrocities, you might do well to ask your questions in Washington. Information of this sort is widely disseminated there."

"I hear you, colonel. But this is where the bodies are buried."

He acknowledged the statement with a shrug and a "Yes, well...."

"If you knew anything, would you tell me?"

"That would depend on the circumstances under which you asked your questions." He had not intended this to sound flirtatious, but now that it was out there, he could not come up with anything to say that would reduce its impact.

She smiled. "The question for me, then, would be, Do I believe you know something that would be worth my creating such a circumstance?"

"Probably not," he said.

She patted down her hair, an unnecessary gesture — it was held by a gold barrette, not a strand out of place — and stood. "I'd better see to Jerry. I left him out back. He's not feeling too well." She extended her hand and he shook it, saying, "Good luck with your story."

The colonel turned back to his drink, to a consideration of the woman. Margery. Perhaps, he thought, he *had* intended to flirt with her.

"Oh, colonel!"

She had stopped a few feet away.

"I'm staying at the Loma Linda." Once again she smiled. "In case you remember something."

When the colonel returned to his hotel that evening, he found the indigo lizard clinging to the wall beside the bathroom mirror. A little tipsy — it had been a while since he'd had four vodkas in such a short time — he put his face close to the lizard and asked, "Are you magic?"

The lizard did not appear to notice him.

"Do you eat flies, or do you consume...?" The colonel could not think of a word to finish his sentence; then he said, "Light. Do you consume light and breathe out fire? No?" He looked at himself in the mirror, at his ridiculous uniform and gilt-braided hat. His tired eyes. "To hell with you," he said. He bent to the sink and splashed water onto his face; on straightening he discovered that the lizard had crawled onto the surface of the mirror and was staring at him. The stare affected the colonel profoundly, causing him to perceive his own woeful condition. Alone except for a lizard, half-drunk in a bathroom, on an endless fool's errand. He resisted the easy allure of self-pity and stood rigid, almost at attention, until the feeling had passed. The lizard continued to watch him, and the colonel grew annoyed with those unblinking orange eyes. He clapped his hands, trying to drive it away, but it remained motionless, lifeless as a rubber toy. Its stare made him feel weak and unfocused, thoughts slopping about inside his skull, and he lifted his hand, intending to knock it from its perch. But before he could act, a curious lightness invaded his body, enfeebling him, and a burst of orange radiance blinded him, and for a moment, scarcely more than a second or two, he saw an enormous figure looming above. A darkly complected man wearing a hat, one hand upraised. His vision cleared and he felt once again the weight of flesh and bone; he saw his reflection in the mirror. A befuddled little man in a silly hat, standing with his hand upraised.

The lizard was gone.

The colonel hurriedly undressed and switched off the lights and slipped beneath the sheets. He could not put from mind the absurd notion that he had seen himself briefly from the lizard's perspective; he recalled the feeling of dizzy instability he had derived from looking into the lizard's eyes, and wondered if the two experiences had been connected. But what did this speculation imply? That somehow his soul had been trapped for an instant inside the lizard's skin? Even more absurd. And yet he could think of nothing else to explain such an extreme disassociation. Though the colonel did not subscribe to a view of creation that accepted explanations of this kind, neither did he demand logic of the world, and he refused to let the experience ruin his sleep. He closed his eyes, said a hasty prayer for the souls of the three pilots he had shot

from the sky, and soon drifted off into a black peace that lasted well into the day.

THE COLONEL DID NOT arrive at the Drive-in Puerto Rico until nine o'clock the next morning. Most of the tables on the deck were occupied. At one sat Margery Emmons; she was talking to a thin, balding man in a pale yellow *guayabera* who now and then cast anxious glances to the side. Her eyes slid toward the colonel as he took a seat in the corner of the deck closest to the water, but she did not smile and gave no other sign of recognition. The colonel held a tiny mental burial for the minor fantasy he had conjured concerning her, and had a few sips of the strong black coffee that Tomas's girl, unbidden, brought to his table.

Beyond the break the heavy swells glittered in patches, as if irradiated by the backs of glowing swimmers threatening to surface as they pushed their way in toward shore, shattering into white plumes of spray that rose and fell with the abandon of wild horses, and to the east, Punta Manabique stretched out into darker waters like a long green witch's finger with a palm tree at its tip, its trunk forced by the wind to grow almost horizontal to the ground, so that at the distance it resembled a curving talon. The amiable chatter of the other patrons seemed part of nature, a random counterpoint to the percussive surf. A sweetish smell was borne on the north wind, overwhelming the scents of beans, eggs, and sausage, and the colonel imagined that a great ship filled with spices had been breached just over the horizon, its hull leaking streams of cinnamon and myrrh. The day held too much beauty for his troubled cast of mind and he gazed down into his coffee, at the trembling incomplete reflection of his face, an image perfect in its summation of his mood. When Tomás dropped into the seat opposite him, the colonel asked him immediately about the lizard.

"You have seen it again...or another like it?" asked Tomás in a guileless tone that caused the colonel to suspect that Tomás knew something he himself did not; but then he thought that even if Tomás knew nothing, he would wish to give the impression that he did.

He told Tomás of his experiences the previous evening; when he had finished his story, Tomás said, "Hmm...curious."

"'Curious?'" said the colonel. "I expected more of a reaction. A lecture on spirit lizards, perhaps."

"There are no such things. At least not that I'm aware of."

"What is it, then?" the colonel asked after a pause.

"The lizard?" Tomás made a casual gesture, writing with his forefinger a sequence of quick little loops in the air. "How would I — a poor deluded *hechicero* — understand such a phenomenon? I think you should seek the help of a real expert. Perhaps there is someone at the Botanical Station who will advise you."

The colonel refused to rise to this bait. "You painted a lizard on your wall like the one I saw. A lizard of a type neither of us have seen before. Can you explain it?"

"I was kneeling by a corner of the mural, trying to think what I should put in the space directly above the space where I intended to paint the face of Satan. It came into my mind to paint a lizard. An indigo lizard. With orange eyes. I recall that I felt rather strongly about this decision. Certain that it was correct. Since my artistic choices do not usually incur such a feeling of certitude, I made note of the fact. Apart than that...the world is replete with these strange correspondences. Who can guess their cause or their meaning?"

The girl set a plate of fried eggs, tortillas, and peppers in front of the colonel and asked if Tomás wanted something.

"*Aguardiente*," he told her.

"Drinking so early?" The colonel tore off a piece of tortilla and dipped it in yolk.

"Early for one is late for another. All my life I have been a sober man. Now, at life's end, I wish to be drunk. There are things to be learned from both conditions."

"You'll outlive us all, Tomás," said the colonel, chewing.

"You speak as if you know, yet you know nothing."

Tomás seemed aggravated; the colonel let the subject drop.

"I'm certain there's no connection between the lizard I saw and the one you painted," he said. "But nonetheless...."

"Do you know why you have come here this morning? You want me to tell you that the lizard is magical. It climbed down from my wall and sought you out. It is a message, a supernatural being compressed into the

shape of a message. It has great import in your life. It is a sending from Oxala or Jesus or some primitive black shape whose name has the sound of a bubble squeezed up through jungle water from some terrible netherworld. It wants you to see yourself as it sees you. Henceforth, you must always give homage to this lizard and the god who sent it. *That* is what you want me to tell you. Because hearing such shit will make you believe nothing happened to you last night. That it was a dream, a mental slip. Then you'll be comfortable. You'll be able to ignore it."

The girl handed Tomás a glass and an unlabeled bottle of clear liquid. He poured a stiff measure. Startled by his vehemence, the colonel could not think what to say. At a nearby table a blond girl in a navy blue T-shirt with the word *WOLVERINES* printed on the chest collapsed in laughter and shrilled, "I just can't believe you said that!" Margery, the colonel saw, had departed.

Tomás drank, let out a sigh, wiped his mouth on his forearm.

"I apologize if I've angered you," said the colonel.

The old man made a popping sound with his lips and shook his head sadly. "When I came to Puerto Morada many years ago, I liked this place." He tapped the tabletop. "This right here. This stretch of beach, I liked it very much. I knew I had to build my restaurant here. It was simple as that. I did not say to myself, This is a magic place, and if I build here, it will be a magic restaurant. Magic is an unwieldy word. It fails to communicate its true meaning. It has come to mean great works. A system of spells, a logic of supernatural connections. I am a *hechicero*, not a magician. I have no system, no history of great works. I see things, I feel things. I sometimes recognize certain sights and feelings that may have slightly more significance than certain others. Because I have done this for many years, on occasion I can create small effects. So small you might not notice them. But I cannot paint a lizard and cause it to come alive. I cannot ask it to seek you out and make you see through its eyes. If I played any part in what happened to you, I was acting without intent or forethought. This does not mean, however, that what happened was not magical."

Two small boys ran past on the beach, yelling and waving their arms, chasing a skeletal yellow pariah dog that was so weak on its legs, it barely could outrun them; it stopped to catch its wind, panting, its body curled, gazing with desolate eyes back at its pursuers, then loped off as the boys drew near.

"It may have no importance," said Tomás. "This lizard of yours. It may signify nothing. The energy of the world will sometimes express itself in singular ways and for no apparent reason. But you must try to understand it. It is yours alone to understand."

The colonel thought that the old man's advice about going to the Botanical Station was the most salient thing he had said. He wished now he had never mentioned the lizard. Tomás would likely go on at length about the subject of magic, its subtle nature, and the colonel did not want to be rude. But Tomás only looked about at the tables, at the bar, and said, "Tell me, Mauricio. Have you ever had a place that was yours? Not a place owned, or a place occupied. I'm speaking about one that called to your heart, your soul. One where you felt you absolutely belonged."

"Not for a long time, certainly."

Tomás poured another glass of *aguardiente*. "But you like my restaurant, eh? The place itself, not just the food and drink."

"I come here as often as I can, don't I? Of course I like it. You're a fortunate man to have such a beautiful home." As an afterthought, the colonel asked, "Why did you name it the Drive-in Puerto Rico?"

"The words have a pretty sound." Tomás touched the edge of the colonel's plate. "Your eggs are cold."

THE BOTANICAL STATION, operated by Princeton University, was located several miles from the center of town. Several dozen acres of plantation were enclosed by a hurricane fence and centered by a long, low building of pale brown concrete block, topped by a shingle roof edged in darker brown. Air conditioners were mounted beneath each window. The glass panes spotless, the lawn out front manicured. A healthy-looking parrot sat on a ring perch beside the door, clucking gently to itself. Automatic sprinklers whirled. It was so thoroughly American a place, everything so shiny and neat, that when the colonel stepped into the frosty interior, he felt that he had crossed a border illegally, bringing with him the dust of poorer land. He pictured the beads of sweat on his brow popping like champagne bubbles.

He presented himself at the reception desk, inquiring if there was anyone about who had some expertise in herpetology, and moments later

he was standing in an office, leaning over the shoulder of one Dr. Timothy Hicks, a sunburned young man with shoulder-length brown hair, looking at pictures of lizards on a computer screen.

"See anything?" Dr. Hicks asked.

"They all look the same," said the colonel. "No...wait. There. That one there."

On the screen was a photograph of a lizard whose shape resembled the one that had been haunting the colonel's hotel room.

"*Norops bicarum*." Dr. Hicks punched the keys and the photo vanished, then reappeared magnified several times over. "One of the anoles."

Reading the information printed beneath the photo, the colonel was disappointed to learn that *Norops bicarum* grew to lengths of only five inches.

"The one I saw was considerably larger," he said. "Eight or nine inches long. And it was indigo in color."

"Solid indigo?"

"Yes...except for some black markings around the face."

Dr. Hicks tapped the side of his keyboard. "Well, I'm stumped. If you can catch it, I'd love to have a look at it. There are thirty-six known varieties of anole in this part of Central America. Who knows? Maybe you've found number thirty-seven."

He gestured toward a chair on the other side of the desk and the colonel took a seat.

"What do lizards see?" the colonel asked.

"They have excellent vision. They see colors...it's very much like human vision. This fellow here is monoscopic. His eyes are set so that he sees in different directions. Two distinct visual fields. Some chameleons are able to see both ahead of them and behind them at the same time. But some types of anole have stereoscopic vision. They see a single image."

Disappointed that he had not resolved the mystery, the colonel thanked Dr. Hicks, promising to bring the lizard to him if he could catch it, and returned to his hotel. He plumped up his pillows and lay on the bed, opened the book he had been reading, but his mind would not fit onto the page, and after a few minutes he set the book down. Loneliness at that moment struck him as less a passing condition than as an environment in

which he was trapped. The sounds of life from without — traffic, the cries of vendors — seemed to arise from a great distance, and he had the thought that if he were to shout, no one would hear him. For an antidote, he picked up his cell phone, a recent acquisition that he rarely used, and called his father's house in San Pedro Sula.

His sister answered in a strained voice. "*Digame!*"

"*Hola, Teresa!*"

"Oh...Mauricio."

"How are things?"

"Fine," she said.

In the background he heard a commotion.

"It sounds as if you've got company."

"Is that how it sounds? Like I'm entertaining?" Teresa scoffed at the notion. "That's right. I'm always entertaining. Fabulous guests. Champagne brunches. You don't know what you're missing."

"Is there something wrong?"

A brief silence. "How can you ask that question? Oh, I forgot. You're never here. You don't know the unending joy of our life."

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

"Where shall I start? Your father. Do you know he's running around with a twenty-two-year-old woman? *Una puta sucia!* He brings her here. To our mother's house. He carries on in front of your nephews. And your nephews...." She moved the receiver away from her mouth and shouted at someone to be quiet. "Your nephews. They're doing wonderfully. Here. I'll let them tell you themselves."

A second later, a sullen boyish voice said, "What do you want?"

"Emilio?"

Silence.

"Are you being difficult with your mother?"

"Fuck yourself," Emilio said.

Immediately thereafter, Teresa said, "Do you see how well he's doing? He's a drug addict, Mauricio! He's like you. He's hardly ever here. And when he does come home, it's only to steal money for his cocaine! And your other nephew...your precious Pepe! He told me the other day that it is his ambition to become a homosexual. His *ambition!* God knows, I do not judge those people, but I don't believe that homosexuality

should be an ambition!" A pause during which he heard her breathing hard; then, her voice sugary, she asked, "So how are you? *Where* are you?"

"Puerto Morada," he said. "Listen, Teresa. I'm sorry things aren't going well. I'll try to get back home soon."

"No, please! Not on our account. It would be criminal to interrupt your world tour."

"You know I'm not doing this by choice."

"You've been away twenty years, and you say it's not by choice? That's a lifetime, Mauricio. Twenty years. I married, had children. My husband died. Mother died, and our father grew old. You don't know any of it. Just the dates. The birthdays, the funerals. Now and then you get lonely and you'll call or drop in for a visit and pretend you're part of our family. But you're not...you're a stranger. A ghost who haunts us at Christmas and Easter."

"You know why I'm...", he began

"Don't tell me it's the business! It can't be just the business that's kept you away so long."

Resentful, yet at the same time knowing there was some truth to Teresa's words, that his own indulgent nature had been in play, the colonel said nothing.

"I have to go. I have things...", Teresa broke off; then she said, "I love you, Mauricio. But I hardly know you. I...I'm sorry."

After hanging up, the colonel sat on the edge of his bed, unable to clear his sister's words from mind. A ghost. It was an apt image. While struggling with this new conception of his relationship with his family, he noticed the indigo lizard on the wall above the bathroom door; he was so depressed, he could not rouse himself to attempt its capture. The light dimmed; scattered raindrops began to fall. He lay down and let the seething of the rain on the palmetto fronds lull him to sleep. Shortly before three o'clock that afternoon he was wakened by a pounding on his door. "Who is it?" he called.

"Maury! Let me in!"

When he opened the door, Jerry Gammage piled into the room, followed by Margery Emmons. They both began talking at once.

"Man, I need your help...."

"I'm sorry to intrude...."

Margery succeeded in outvoicing Gammage. "Jerry's in some trouble."

"I think they mighta spotted me on the beach," Gammage said.

"Who spotted you?" asked the colonel.

"Carbonell's men. They're trying to kill me."

"What possible reason...."

"I'll explain everything, I promise," Margery said. "Will you let us stay here for a while?"

"I know I got no papers on you, Maury," Gammage said. "But I'm in the shit."

The colonel closed the door and indicated that they should sit. They perched side-by-side on the foot of the bed, gazing at him like anxious children.

"Why does Carbonell want to kill you?" he asked.

"Battalion Three-Sixteen." Gammage twisted his mouth into a gloomy shape. "I got tape, pictures...everything."

Margery shot the colonel a guilty look, but did not speak.

"Somehow they got wind of it," Gammage went on. "They been beating the bushes for me since yesterday afternoon. I can't risk the airport. I'd never get past the checkpoints on the highway. Basically, I'm fucked."

"You have this material with you?" asked the colonel.

Gammage nodded.

"Perhaps if you surrendered it...."

"I got pictures of Carbonell doing horror movie shit with men, women, little kids. He's twenty years younger, but you can tell it's him. He posed for the shots. The guy's fucking Dracula. He's not gonna let me bounce."

"He's not exaggerating," Margery said. "I've seen some of the pictures."

The colonel asked Gammage what he planned to do.

"Live through the evening," said Gammage. "Rancher I know in Choluteca owes me. Guy's got a private plane. Little single-engine job. If I can smuggle myself to Choluteca, I think he'll fly me down to Bluefields."

The colonel paced across the room, sat on the arm of a chair by the window, gazing out through the palmetto fronds at the empty sunstruck

street. His thoughts moved like sentries back and forth between two points.

"What's wrong?" Margery asked.

"You've put me in a difficult position," he said. "By helping you, I'll be committing treason."

The room seemed to hold a faint humming; off along the street, a truck engine turned over, startling in its vulgar amplitude, like a beast clearing its throat. Then Gammage said, "I understand what you're saying, Maury, but what Carbonell did, that goes way past treason."

"These are citizens of your own country we're talking about," Margery said. "Innocents. Tortured and macheted. Buried alive."

"I know!" The colonel stood, turning his back on them. "I know things like this have gone on. I...."

"They're going on now," Margery said.

"...I don't condone them. But what will happen once you tell your story for the cameras? Will Carbonell be disgraced? Executed? Perhaps. But what will happen to those who sanctioned these abuses? Nothing. The world will look down their noses at us as they always have. Soon the story will be forgotten and the men who gave Carbonell his license to slaughter, they will remain untouched."

"I'm not going to try and kid you, Maury," Gammage said. "I can't guarantee anything. But even if it's just Carbonell goes in the crapper, that's gotta be a good thing, right?"

Men's voices out in the hall, challenging, peremptory. A heavy knocking at a nearby door.

"Not condoning something," Margery said. "Is that your idea of a moral stance? I don't believe it. I believe you're a good man."

The colonel allowed himself a polite chuckle.

"If I'm off-base," she said, "now's the time to prove it."

She was trying to manipulate him, but given the circumstances, that was forgivable. "'Moral stance' is an easy term to sling about when one's own morality is not at issue," he said.

He was not going to let Carbonell have them, and not merely because Gammage was his friend and Margery someone to whom he was attracted. It was personal between him and Carbonell. Even if the man were innocent of the crimes Gammage claimed for him, his cologne was

offensive, his manner pompous, his smile the emblem of a vain and supercilious nature. The colonel's distaste for him was founded as much by chemistry as principle, and he wondered if all his life's decisions had been informed by such trivial impulses.

"Go into the bathroom," he said. "I'll do what I can."

Once they had sequestered themselves in the bathroom, the colonel waited on the bed. The fabric of his decision was paper-thin, but he knew it would hold. He had felt this same frail decisiveness during the war, and he had always maintained his resolve even in the face of battle. But his battles had been fought in the service of his country, and he was not certain in whose service he was preparing now to fight. His decision satisfied him, however. He was calm and controlled. Just as he had been when he flew a sortie.

A knock came at the door; a commanding voice called out.

"*Momentito!*" The colonel shrugged into his uniform jacket and opened the door. Standing before him was a squat black man wearing captain's bars on his fatigues, sweat beading his forehead and shining in the creases of his neck. When he recognized the colonel, his stony expression faltered.

"Your pardon, Colonel," he said. "But I have orders to search all the rooms."

"I am alone," said Colonel Galpa. "It will not be necessary."

A soldier bearing an automatic rifle moved up behind the captain, who said, with more than a touch of desperation, "I intend no disrespect, sir, but I have my orders."

The colonel threw open the door, permitting the captain to see the entire room. "Are you satisfied?"

The captain gestured at the soldier behind him. "Sir, you must allow my man to inspect the room. Someone may have obtained entrance while you were out."

"I have been here all afternoon. It's as I told you. I am alone."

Letting his hand drop to his sidearm, the captain composed his features and said, "This is a matter of national security, Colonel. You must understand my position. I have no choice but to insist."

"What is your name, Captain?"

The captain straightened, squared his shoulders, but looked on the verge of tears. "Jose Evangelista. Please, sir. Will you stand aside?"

"Very well. But be quick!"

Reluctantly, his heart racing, he stepped back and the soldier, a mestizo, barely more than a boy with a wispy mustache and curly hair, entered the room and inspected the closet, poked under the bed.

"There," said the colonel. "You have done your duty. Now will you give me my privacy?"

The soldier bent an ear toward the bathroom door, then gestured excitedly at it; the captain drew his sidearm and trained it on the colonel.

"Are you insane? What do you think you're doing?" The colonel went face-to-face with the captain. "I promise...you will regret this!"

Crouching, his rifle at the ready, the soldier flung open the bathroom door, and Margery, who was standing behind it, dripping wet, her hair turbaned in a towel, holding another towel to cover herself, let out a shriek. The soldier recoiled, staring open-mouthed at her.

"Ay, Dios!" said Captain Evangelista.

"Are the needs of national security now satisfied?" the colonel asked him. "Then perhaps you would be so kind as to leave us alone."

The captain barked an order and the soldier hurried from the room. Offering florid apology, the captain, too, retreated. Colonel Galpa slammed the door behind him. Margery started to speak, but the colonel put a finger to his lips, silencing her, and listened at the door. Once assured that the soldiers had left, he went to her and said, "They will make a report, and it's very possible someone else will be sent to investigate."

"What should we do?"

"If they're suspicious, and we must assume they are, they will watch the hotel. There's nothing we can do...not until dark."

"The coast clear?" Gammage poked his head out from the bathroom. Fully clothed, he, too, was wet.

"For the moment," said the colonel.

"Do you really believe they'll send someone else?" Margery asked.

"Considering the circumstances...yes."

She finished tucking the edge of the towel beneath her arm, contriving of it a dress. "Jerry. I think you should stay hidden in the bathroom. If they do come back, we don't want them to hear you running for cover."

"Choluteca may not be the best option," said the colonel. "The

checkpoints will be on alert for at least a day or two. How much money do you have?"

"Couple hundred *lempira*," said Gammage. "Maybe fifty bucks American." And Margery said, "Forty dollars, more or less."

"I know someone who can arrange for a boat to take you down the coast," the colonel said to Gammage. "Tonight, probably. It will cost several hundred dollars."

"I can get it," said Margery.

"Then our only problem is how to get Jerry to the boat. I suppose that can be arranged as well."

"I owe you, Maury," Gammage said. "I didn't realize I'd be putting your ass on the line like this."

"You know how you can repay me."

"I'll push the story hard as I can, man."

Margery shooed Gammage back into the bathroom.

"All right, all right." He grabbed a magazine off the colonel's nightstand. "If you order food, get me something. I didn't have time for breakfast."

Margery closed the bathroom door, removed the towel from her hair, then she pulled back the bedcovers and slipped beneath them, while the colonel watched in bewilderment. She wriggled about, dropped the bath towel on the floor beside the bed. "If they come back, we better give them something juicy to report." She smiled wickedly. "Well, don't keep me waiting, Mauricio. Take off your clothes."

To the colonel's great discomfort, as he disrobed he realized he was wearing a pair of undershorts decorated with little jet planes, a humorous gift that someone had presented him the previous month when he was visiting Puerto Cortez. Seeing them, Margery affected amazement. "Oh, my!" she said. "Should I be afraid?"

The colonel felt himself blushing. He slid beneath the sheets on the opposite side of the bed and lay on his back, gazing up at the ceiling. The tension of anxiety had been replaced by a different kind of tension. He wanted to turn his head toward her, but held himself rigid, attuned to the sound of Margery's breath. Then the bathroom door burst open; he started up guiltily.

"Golly gee." Gammage grinned down at them. "I was gonna say, 'Get a room,' but I guess you already got one." He shuffled the magazines on the nightstand. "Got anything to read in English?"

"No," said the colonel stiffly, and Margery said, "Get the hell outa here, Jerry!"

Gammage's grin broadened. "Damn, I wish I had my camera. The guys back in Atlanta would pay serious bucks for this picture."

"Jerry!"

"I'm gone." He chose another magazine, looked down at them fondly. "You kids have fun."

The bathroom door closed and the silence in the room seemed to thicken. The sun broke from the clouds, and pale yellow light cast a complicated shadow on the bed. A scent of gasoline drifted on the breeze. The colonel's chest felt banded by heavy restraints.

"Try and relax," Margery told him.

"I'm trying."

After a second she touched his shoulder. He stiffened at the contact, but when she left her hand there, whispering, "Just take it easy, okay?" his nervousness began to ebb and his breathing became steady.

"Know what Jerry says about you?"

"I can only guess," said the colonel.

"He says you've got the strangest life of anyone he's ever met."

"I suppose it must seem so."

"He also says you're the only honest man he knows."

"He doesn't have enough information to make that judgment."

"You don't think of yourself as honest?"

A thin stream of radio music trickled from the street, and the colonel caught the words "...you never returned to me...." before it faded. "Not especially," he said.

"I think you're honest. I'm not overlooking the tricks everyone plays on themselves, the little deceits that make up so much of our lives. They're inescapable. But I think you're honest when it counts."

As she spoke he cut his eyes toward her. He had assumed she was looking at him, but she was on her side, with her eyes closed, as if she were talking to someone in her thoughts, not to him. He took in the white curve of her shoulder, the little shadow in the hollow of her throat. Her face seemed softer than it had the night before, dazed and girlish, and he had the idea that whomever she was thinking of, whether him or some other, her thoughts of that person were slow and reflective and warm.

"I hope we get a chance to talk sometime when things are different," she said. "When we can concentrate on what we're saying."

The colonel wanted to say that he was fairly concentrated at that moment, but knew this would strike a wrong note. Her voice lulled him, and he closed his own eyes, listening.

"I'd like you to tell me about your life," Margery went on. "Not so I can understand it. I'd just like to hear you tell about it." She left a pause. "Do you know what a diorama is? This circular strip of metal...it's not always metal. Sometimes it's canvas and there are lights behind it. But it's painted with all these little scenes from life, from one culture usually, and it goes around and around. And even if you watch for a long time, if you come to know which scenes are about to appear, after a while you realize you're seeing them differently. Noticing different things about them. That's how your life sounds to me. It's like you've been living in a diorama. Viewing the same scenes over and over from this odd distance...." She sighed. "The adrenaline's wearing off. I feel so tired."

"Go to sleep, then."

"I'm tired, not sleepy. How about you?"

"If you keep talking, I think I might sleep."

"Am I that boring?"

"No, it's the sound of your voice, it's nice...it makes me peaceful."

"Really? That's sweet." Some seconds glided by and then she said, "Now I can't think of anything to talk about."

"Tell me about your life."

"God! Now that is boring!"

"It wasn't boring today, was it?"

"Today was unusual." She shifted about, and her breath stirred his hair. "I did produce a feature once in Borneo. We spent nearly a month there. The forests were on fire — that's what the feature was about. We were based in a town on the coast. Sumarinda. A nice air-conditioned hotel. But a lot of the time we were inland, closer to the fires. When the wind was right, ash fell from the sky and covered everything. The river, the land. There were days when all of us were gray. The Dayaks, the Americans...everyone. We were a single gray race. Except we were running around, shooting film, taking hits of oxygen, and the Dayaks were just hanging onto life. We ferried a few of them out on the helicopters, but

the rest simply wouldn't be moved, even though some of the old people were dying. Some of the footage we got was amazing. Once we were up near the edge of the fire. All you could hear was roaring and crackling. One of the cameramen waded across a river so he could shoot into the flames. He'd just found a good position when a deer broke from the trees nearby and began running alongside the bank. It was burning. A fringe of flame licking up from its back. Deer fur...it's tough, you know. It's not like cat fur. It wouldn't burn easily. Maybe burning pitch drizzled down onto its back from a tree. Anyway, I couldn't hear if it was making any cry, the fire was so loud, but it must have been crazy with pain. Just below where our cameraman crossed was a waterfall and a deep pool beneath it, and if the deer had gone into the water, it might have been all right. But it kept running parallel to the bank, leaping over fallen trees, avoiding burning branches, incredibly graceful, trying to outrun the pain. It almost seemed to be flying. Like the fire on its back was empowering it. I remember thinking it didn't look real. Life never composes those kind of images, I told myself. It was something out of a book. A fantasy novel or a fairy tale. But when I was editing the footage I thought maybe this was how life works. Sometimes out of all the mess and clutter and sadness, it says something. It speaks what for us would be a word or a sentence or a poem, and mostly we don't notice...or else we're not around when it happens. But that one time we were there, we could bear witness. Out of all the smoke and flame and death, this perfect burning deer...."

WHEN THE COLONEL WOKE he was on his stomach, head turned toward the bedside table. Resting thereon was the indigo lizard, its tiny feet dark against the white shiny paper of a magazine ad, its orange eyes shining faintly in the twilight. The sight did not disturb him. If it was only a lizard, it was a pretty one; if it was something more, then he doubted it was dangerous. He had never thought that, he realized. It had merely unnerved him. Staring at it, he began to think of the eyes as lenses and wondered what lay behind them. A speck of bloody tissue, or a scrap of unpredictable genius given form by some miraculous congruency...or was it both? He thought about Margery's Borneo story. How unexpected it had been, seeming to arise from her like the deer from the burning forest.

Perhaps in each instance it had been less a remarkable occurrence than a case of low expectations exceeded.

Margery began snoring. Delicate breaths edged with a glutinous phrasing. He rolled onto his back, careful not to wake her. The covers had slipped down about her waist, but she still lay on her side, one arm guarding her breasts, her hair undone, spilling over her cheek. At the point of her shoulder was a mole, perfectly round, like a period completing the milky phrase of her body. The sweet staleness of her breath, lips parted to reveal the bottom of a tooth. She seemed wholly unexpected. As unexpected as her story. It was not the sort of thing, he thought, that she would tell everyone, at least not in the way she had told it to him, and while he was not prepared to give this much weight, to derive from it any promise, it intrigued him nonetheless. Everything she had done until that moment could be explained in terms of a professional pragmatism, but the story was unmistakably an intimacy. His eyes went again to her breasts, and he suddenly longed to pull her against him, to feel her come awake in his arms. Yet longing was notched not by a fear of rejection or by the awkwardness of the situation, but by his concern that this was only circumstantially different from dozens of evenings he had spent with women who were no more than joyless functionaries, expressions of public debt.

A light knock at the door alerted the colonel. Margery stirred, but continued to breathe deeply. He slipped out of bed and started to put on his trousers, then decided that whoever it was should see the whole show. He cracked the door. A tall young *mestizo* in a white waiter's jacket was standing in the hall, holding a tray that bore two wine glasses and a green bottle in an ice bucket and a silver serving dish. "*Con permiso...*," the waiter began, but the colonel shushed him. The man nodded, pointed to the tray, and adopted an inquiring look. "*Bueno...pase,*" whispered the colonel, and opened the door to admit him, instructing him to set the tray on the chair by the window, and to do it quietly.

The waiter tiptoed across the carpet, his eyes roaming about the room. Though the colonel detected no bulge in the waiter's jacket that would indicate a weapon, judging by his bearing, the economy of his movements, he suspected that beneath it the man was wearing a standard-issue army T-shirt. As the waiter turned to make his exit, his eyes dropped

to the colonel's undershorts and amusement grazed his lips. He pressed a small envelope into the colonel's hand, and with a slight bow, not appearing to expect a tip, he slipped out the door and was gone.

Three words were printed on the card in the envelope:

Enjoy your *gringa*.

Beneath this salutation, intended — the colonel knew — to make him aware of the all-seeing eye now focused on him, was a scrawled signature, a single name of which only a fancifully scripted capitol C was legible. That Carbonell signed himself like an emperor did not surprise him, nor did he find it laughable — though emperors were out of fashion, despots were not, and of such stuff as Carbonell were despots made. The colonel put on his trousers, shifted the tray to the floor, and sat by the window as darkness came to Puerto Morada. Intimations of what might come of the night turned slowly in his head, like millwheels in a lazy stream, affording him a glimpse of every bladed consequence. The woman in his bed moaned weakly, as in a fever; her pale face blurred and indefinite in the shadow, like a white stone glimpsed through running water. Two roaring lights passed on the street; sprightly music from a nearby *cantina* braided the hissing of the wind in the palmettos. The colonel's stomach growled. He ate several of the shrimp contained within the serving dish, but did not open the wine.



SHORTLY AFTER nine o'clock, the hour when the Drive-in Puerto Rico customarily closed, Margery and the colonel went to talk with Tomás, leaving Gammage hiding in the room. They walked along the verge of the beach, keeping to the shadow of a palm hammock. Drops of orange fire pointed the windows of little wooden houses tucked in among the sinuous trunks, each one also announced by the rattle of a generator, and on occasion a lesser shadow emerged from the dark, tipped its hat and wished them good evening. Off on the horizon a lopsided moon, like an ancient medal of bone, paved the sea with a dwindling silver road, and the swarm of stars in its wild glitter seemed to construct a constant flickering conversation, causing the colonel to think that if he could hear them, their

voices would resemble those of crickets. Bats squeaked high in the fronds; invisible chickens clucked; a dog barked distantly, with neurotic regularity. The wind had died, and mosquitoes whined in the colonel's hair.

"Tomás feels that women have been a misfortune in his life," he said as they came in sight of the Drive-in Puerto Rico. "He may appear rude."

Margery slapped at her neck. "Maybe I shouldn't be with you."

"No, it's better he knows a woman is involved."

"But what if he won't help?"

"He will. His attitude toward women doesn't reflect dislike, just a mistrust of their effect on him. As far as I know, he has never been able to refuse them anything."

The lights on the deck of the restaurant had been switched off, and Tomás was leaning on the railing. On spotting Margery he let fall the hand he had raised in greeting and his face grew impassive. As they sat together and the colonel told him what was required and why, he merely grunted in response. Margery continued slapping at mosquitoes, and finally, annoyed by these interruptions, Tomás went into the restaurant and returned with a jar containing a translucent greenish paste, which he handed to Margery. She sniffed at it, wrinkled her nose.

"It is not perfume," he said brusquely. "However, it will keep away the mosquitoes."

She thanked him and began dabbing it onto her arms and neck.

With a dolorous sigh, Tomás sat with his back to the railing, his face angled toward the stars. "Benito Casamayor has a suitable boat. And he is in need of money. But he will want a good price to challenge the authority of Felix Carbonell."

"How much?" Margery asked.

"A thousand might persuade him."

"Lempira?"

"Dollars," said Tomás.

"I can have it within an hour."

Tomás sniffed, a sign — the colonel thought — of his contempt for anyone who could so easily promise a thousand dollars. "I'll arrange for Benito to be at the end of Punta Manabique at two o'clock in the morning. That will give him time to prepare his boat."

"How will we get Jerry to the boat?"

Tomás refitted his gaze to the horizon. Their edges gone diaphanous, all smoke and luminous mother of pearl, bulky clouds had closed in around the moon, framing it in glowing complexity, like angels heralding a glorious birth in a Rafael or a Titian. A fish splashed in the offing, a sickly generator stuttered to life among the palms.

"How big a man is your friend?" Tomás asked.

"About six feet," Margery said. "Two hundred pounds, maybe."

"A little more, I think," said Colonel Galpa.

"There is a woman from the Bay Islands here in town," said Tomás. "Maude Brooks. The people call her Sister Anaya. She tells fortunes at the hotels."

"I think I've seen her," Margery said. "A big black woman...wears a turban?"

Tomás nodded. "She will come to Mauricio's hotel and provide your friend with a disguise. She will remain in the room, and he will leave, pretending to be her. But you will require something with which to color his skin."

"I have boot polish," said the colonel. "It's brown, but in the dark no one is likely to notice."

"Do we pay her, too?" Margery asked.

"She will tell you her price." Tomás chuckled. "Bring a great deal of money."

A flow of wind poured in off the water, growing stronger by the second, flapping the colonel's jacket, twitching the end of Tomás's braid. For the first time, he looked directly at Margery. His creased, leathery face seemed more an accidental pattern of nature than a human design, the sort of shape your eye might assemble from the strands in a mound of seaweed. "Give me your hand," he said.

She glanced anxiously at the colonel, but complied.

Tomás did not hold her hand, simply let it rest on his palm. He kept his eyes on her and she on him. It appeared initially that they were engaged in a contest of wills; but then the colonel realized that neither one showed evidence of strain. Still, it made him uneasy and he asked Tomás what he was doing.

"Looking."

"Looking for what?"

"Must I look for something specific? Whenever you try too forcefully to order the world, you fail to see anything."

Soon Tomás withdrew his hand, frowning.

"Is something wrong?" Margery asked.

The old man muttered several words in a language Colonel Galpa did not recognize, then, his eyes downcast, said, "Mauricio. You will have to escort the American to meet Benito. Once he has disguised himself, the three of you must leave the hotel together. You — " he gestured at Margery — "cannot go to Punta Manabique with them. Is there a place where your colleagues might gather at that hour?"

"Club Atomica," she said.

"Then go there. It will seem that Mauricio is walking Madame Anaya home." Tomás addressed himself to the colonel. "Do not accompany him all the way to the point. Leave him on the beach nearby. He will pass into the shadows of the trees. If anyone has followed, they will lose interest in him and follow you back to the club."

The plan sounded eminently workable to the colonel, but he was perturbed by Tomás's subdued manner and asked if he felt ill.

Tomás took such a long time to respond, the colonel grew concerned that he had been stricken and rendered incapable of speech; but at last he said, "It is nothing. An intimation of ills to come. Men of my age often receive morbid signals of the future." He patted the colonel's hand, his own hand trembling. "It is you about whom I am concerned."

"I'm perfectly well," said the colonel. "Except for being hungry. I had only a few shrimp at dinner."

"It is not your health that concerns me. I wonder if you are prepared for what may ensue should Carbonell discover what you have done."

"Carbonell cannot hurt me. I have friends in the capitol whom he will not wish to offend."

"I think you underestimate him...and I am certain that you do not entirely comprehend his character. Men like Carbonell, beasts disguised by a thin dress of human behavior, they sometimes act without regard for consequence. As to your friends, ask yourself this. Who is more valuable to them — the hero of a war fought long ago, or a beast who wears their uniform, whose uncontrollable nature serves to strike fear into the hearts of the people, making them all the more malleable and accepting of their lot?"

Put this way, the question disheartened the colonel. He realized that — matters of principle aside — he was on the verge of risking everything for a man who, albeit a friend, was not a great friend, and for a woman whom he scarcely knew. And to what end? He had little conviction that Carbonell or his masters would be damaged by the revelations Gammage proposed to make. He wondered what his response might be if Margery were not sitting beside him. "I'll be all right," he told Tomás.

The old man made a clucking sound with his tongue. He stared at his hands, which rested flat on the table, the fingers lifting idly — like two ancient blind crabs seeking familiar purchase. "Then there's nothing more to be said."

ENTHRONED IN the chair by the window in the colonel's room, rolls of fat squeezed out over the arms, her voluminous white dress emblazoned with tiny red skeletons, hair turbaned in this same material, her scowling black face diamonded with beads of sweat, Madame Anaya was not shy about voicing her displeasure. "Dere's no television," she said. "De ol' mon tol' me dere were a television." She pursed her cherub lips; almost hidden behind her pouchy cheeks, her eyes gleamed like polished sea beans. "How you 'spect me to sit t'rough half de night wit'out some television?"

"I have magazines," the colonel said. "Books."

"Now what I wan' to read fah? Ruinin' my eyes wit' dat tiny print! You bring me dat television de mon promise!"

"I'm afraid at this hour it's impossible."

Madame Anaya made a beastly noise in her throat, but held her tongue. A brief commotion arose in the bathroom, where Margery was helping Gammage put the finishing touches on his disguise.

"I believe the cafe is still open," said the colonel. "I could bring you something to eat."

"I gots my own." Madame Anaya's right hand, dangling off the chair arm, stirred, and she pointed with a sausage-like finger at her purse, which — so black and bulging, it seemed her familiar — rested beside the chair. "Nevuh trus' Spornish cookin'. Make you weak in de liver." She glared at the colonel. "Dis de night dey be playin' de duppy movies."

"I beg your pardon?"

"On de television. Dey plays de duppy movies at midnight of a Saturday."

The colonel checked his watch. "You're not going to miss much. It's almost over."

"Dey be playin' two of dem," Madame Anaya said reprovingly. "Las' one always de best."

"I'm sorry."

"Been two weeks and dey played dis one, *Curse of de Blood Witch*."

"That was a good one?"

"It were domn funny! De people make it, dey don't know de first t'ing 'bout witches. Mus' be dey t'inkin' magic somet'ing you catch from a book."

The colonel made a noncommittal noise, thinking ahead to the beach, the walk to Punta Manabique, the dangers it might present.

"Magic what people gots in dere bodies. Some gots it in de eye, some in de hand, some in de heart. You gots it all three places, den you a witch."

"I see," said the colonel distractedly, trying to decide whether or not to carry his sidearm. Crime was not unheard of on the beach, but generally it was perpetrated against tourists. Better to leave it in the room — he did not want to arouse suspicion. He glanced at Madame Anaya. Immense and motionless; eyes fixed. She did not appear to be breathing. Then two fingers of her right hand began to move in slow circles, as if she were stirring something. The colonel was drawn to watch them. His head felt warm, thickish, his thoughts subject to a driftiness, similar to the way he had felt on the rare occasions when he smoked marijuana. The air seemed to eddy in response to the stirring of Madame Anaya's fingers, rippling outward, and as the ripples washed over him he came to feel increasingly stoned, a faint keening in his ears. She looked to have no depth, an exotic image painted on a liquid surface. Then, abruptly, the fingers stopped and the colonel became aware that the ripples in her considerable flesh were caused by silent laughter.

"*Curse of de Blood Witch*," she said, and chuckled. "Dat ain't nowhere de way of it."

The bathroom door opened and Margery, followed sheepishly by Gammage, entered. Gammage's white dress and turban were of a piece

with Madame Ananya's, only his were decorated with tiny blue skulls; his face, arms, and sandaled feet were coated with mahogany boot polish. The effect was both gruesome and laughable.

"Oh, God!" said Madame Anaya.

"Don't hate me because I'm beautiful," Gammage said sourly.

The colonel stood. "It's twenty minutes' walk to the point. We should go now."

Gammage looked down at his glistening brown arms. "Man, I don't know about this shit."

Margery rubbed his shoulder. "It'll be fine once you get out onto the beach."

"Now you shed dat dress fah you leave de boat," Madame Anaya said to Gammage as he moved toward the door. "And Benito he fetch it to me."

"Hey, you're welcome to it," Gammage said with false bravado. "It doesn't do a thing for my hips."

She gave another quivery, silent laugh. "Darlin', you hustle yo'self on down to Barrio Clarín, you gon' get more action den you can handle."

The colonel opened the door, peeked out to see if the corridor was clear, then beckoned to Margery and Gammage. They eased past him, and as he closed the door he heard Madame Anaya say, "You tell dat ol' mon, I gon' make him rueful 'bout de television."

The wind that earlier had risen now swooped in off the water in long powerful gusts, giving roaring voice to the palms, their crowns tossing and swaying like an exalted crowd under a mesmeric preacher's thrall. Surf pounded in over the break, exploding in phosphorescent sprays, and racing clouds cut just below the high-riding moon, now and then dimming, but not obscuring its light. Through a gap between trunks, the colonel saw men and women moving their hips and waving their arms under the thatched canopy of a shanty bar to the rhythms of a small steel band. A rich yellow light englobed them, and beyond, for a backdrop, a deep green undulation of shrubs and sea grape, shaking their branches as if in mimicry. At that distance, unable to hear the liquid metallic arpeggios, the shouted vocals, it seemed to him that all the complicated grace of the dancers, the children chasing each other in and out among them, and the jittery attacks of the drummers served a more oblique principle than mere

abandon, that their madness was orchestrated toward some end, a mysterious providence being invoked.

From the heat of late afternoon, the temperature must have dropped twenty-five degrees. The weather had driven most people inside, and so the colonel and Gammage came to the landward end of Punta Manabique without incident. "I'm not gonna hug you, Maury," Gammage said as they stood together. "'Case somebody's watching."

"I appreciate that," the colonel said. "Though it might do wonders for Madame Anaya's reputation." He gazed toward the seaward end; even in the strong moonlight, the thrashing foliage and shifting shadows made it impossible to determine if Benito Casamayor's boat was at hand. "You'd better hurry."

"I'm gone. But once Carbonell's over, I'll come back and we'll hoist a few."

Gammage stood there a moment longer, a vastly ludicrous figure with his turban, his boot-polish skin, and the dress alternately bellling and molding to his thighs. The disguise failed to hide his anxiety. "See ya, Maury." He hesitated another moment, turned, and went trudging off among the palms that bounded the little ridge guarding the point.

The colonel watched him out of sight. Then, head down against the wind, he started toward town, making slow progress in the tacky sand. He felt disconnected from the events of the night. Though concerned for Gammage, for Margery, he was unafraid of what might happen to him, and not because he was assured of his immunity. Either he did not especially care what happened, or else he believed he could do nothing about it. There was evidence to support both conclusions. Perhaps, he thought, they were more or less the same, related products of a larger mental circumstance. The wind chilled him; the concatenations of the surf were assaultive in their loudness, affecting his nerves. His unsettled mood deepened. Despite wanting to see Margery, he came to dread the noise and the crowd at the Club Atomica. Instead of going directly to the club, he decided he would first visit Tomás and let him know how the plan had turned out.

The corrugated metal door of the Drive-in Puerto Rico had been rolled almost all the way down, a half-foot-high gap of light showing beneath it. Tomás must be putting his bills in order, the colonel told himself, or working on his mural. He picked up his pace, slogging into the wind, eager

to see the old man. As he came abreast of the steps that led up onto the deck, he made out a shadowy figure sitting at a table close by the door. "Tomás?" he called, mounting the steps. "What are you doing out here? Aren't you cold?"

Someone pushed him hard, planted a hand between his shoulder blades and sent him reeling forward. He righted himself and saw a short dark man in fatigues standing at the top of the steps, training a pistol at his chest — his lined face had the vaguely oriental cast of a Mayan, and his jacket bore a sergeant's insignia.

"Man, are you crazy?" Furious, the colonel took a step toward him. "I'll have your balls!"

"Colonel Galpa!"

Carbonell had risen from his seat by the door. His presence was not completely unexpected, and the colonel was not shocked to see him; but he felt a kind of fatalistic incredulity, such as he might have experienced on hearing a gloomy prognosis from his doctor.

"Where is Tomás?" he asked.

"Where is the journalist...Gammage?" Carbonell came toward him, easy in his walk, like a cat sauntering toward his favorite chair after a big meal. The wind had not mussed a strand of his slicked-back hair. He folded his arms and waited for the colonel to respond, his face empty of emotion. He was in his shirtsleeves and on one of his cuffs was a dark spattering. In his left hand was a silvered automatic pistol.

"He is gone," said the colonel. "Within a few hours, I imagine, the world will know what you are."

"The world already knows. The world doesn't care."

"Then why concern yourself with Gammage?"

"A loose end," said Carbonell. "I hate them." He stepped back to the door, leaned down and rolled it up head-high. Inside the restaurant, Tomás was sitting on a cane-backed bar stool, lashed to it; his head was down, and there was blood on his shirt. Behind him, his mural had a zodiacal value, like those Hindu renderings of a higher plane, rife with gaudy emblems of illusion. A hurricane lamp rested on the bar, painting the scene with orange light and shadow, adding a gloss that made its brutality seem artful. The colonel could not tell if the old man was alive. Grief and rage contended in him.

"I'll kill you for this," he said to Carbonell,

"Please...let's avoid histrionics," said Carbonell. "We're both soldiers. We both have our duties to perform."

"You call this duty? This is the act of an animal!"

"At times it is my duty to act so."

"Don't hand me that!"

"Had you been ordered to fire your rockets into an enemy city, an action that would kill innocents, would you have obeyed? Of course you would. Now you can afford to speculate on the morality involved. But in the moment of war, you would not have hesitated. Your war may have ended, Colonel. But mine goes on."

"There is no war except the one you prosecute against your own people. Even if there were, torturing an old man is not...."

"A traitor, not an old man!"

"An old man!" The colonel bunched his fists. "But what does it matter? An old man, a child, a pregnant woman...."

"Enough!"

The feral face that the colonel had glimpsed behind Carbonell's polished exterior at the Club Atomica now surfaced. His teeth were bared, his eyes pointed with black light.

"There is no war? What could you know of it? A drunken fool who wanders the hinterlands in search of pleasure! You have no idea of the enemies I confront!"

He gestured sharply with his pistol, signaling the colonel to come inside, then instructed him to sit on the stool next to Tomás and ordered the sergeant to secure him.

"This is my fault," Carbonell said as the sergeant lashed the colonel's legs to the stool. "I failed to take you seriously. I so enjoyed watching the birth of your little conspiracy. I wanted to see who else would be pulled in. When I learned you had left the hotel with the black woman, I realized I had miscalculated. My men were fools not to follow you, but I should have expected them to be fools. I should have taken you into custody earlier."

The sergeant finished his work and Carbonell told him to return to his post. Once the sergeant had vanished into the dark, he rolled down the door and, his back to the colonel, asked, "Where is Gammage?" As he

turned from the door, Tomás groaned. "Ah!" said Carbonell, as if delighted by this sign of life. He lifted Tomás's head. One of the old man's teeth had pierced his lower lip; his eyes were swollen shut. Fresh blood oozed from a cut at his scalp line.

"He's not doing so well," Carbonell said in a tone of mock concern. "Without medical treatment, I doubt there's hope."

The colonel started to vent his outrage, and Carbonell backhanded him with the butt of his pistol. White light shattered behind the colonel's eyes, and he slumped toward unconsciousness, his mind filled with questions — then he realized the questions were all the same. Carbonell was asking about Gammage. Groggy, he said something, an answer, maybe the truth...he wasn't sure what he had said. The words reverberated in his head, mushy, sonorous, like someone very large talking in their sleep. But if he had spoken the truth, it was apparent that learning the truth was not Carbonell's primary motivation. Blow after blow rained upon the colonel's face and chest. Pain no longer occurred in separate incidences; it was a continuum, a bright passage configured with intervals of hellish brightness. At one point he felt a burning in his knee, and at another he believed that his cheek had been bitten. It was as if he were being mauled, not interrogated. Carbonell had become a dimly perceived giant, an immense otherness that shouted and surrounded him with pain. In his mind's eye he saw a black mouth opening, rushing to swallow him, and when he emerged from darkness into a ruddy orange glow, he noticed that the metal door had been raised and Carbonell was standing beneath it, smoking a cigarette, talking — it seemed — to no one in particular.

"...will not tolerate a traitor," he was saying. "That's the big story, not Gammage's...." He smiled. "Gammage's archaeological finds. No, the story that will enthrall our people is that their hero has betrayed the nation. Betrayed *them*. What I have done will be buried in the shadow of that betrayal. But it is always best to avoid trouble, even if it is no great trouble. Tell me where Gammage is, and I will allow the woman to return to the United States."

Margery was alive. Carbonell had her. Striking those two bits of information together produced a spark that nourished the colonel and restored a vague semblance of ambition and intent; but he could not build

it to a blaze. Pain surged in his leg, and he understood he had been shot. Blood was leaking from the side of his knee.

"There was a time," Carbonell said, "when I wanted to know you, Colonel Galpa. When I hoped to understand what sort of man it required to do what you have done. But it is clear to me that you no longer are that man. You have been made decadent and weak by constant adulation... constant indulgence. There is nothing left of you that I would wish to understand." He grasped the handle of the door. "I am offering you a chance to be that man again. If you want to save the woman, tell me about Gammage. Otherwise I will give her to my men." The door made a grating sound as he rolled it down behind him. "Take some time to think about it. But not too long, Colonel. Not too long."

Alone, the colonel felt weaker and more clear-headed, as if Carbonell's presence had been both a confusion and a strength. With effort, he lifted his head to Tomás and spoke his name. The old man gave no sign of having heard. The colonel's left eye was filmed over with blood, making half the world red. He struggled with his bonds, but could not loosen them. The exertion left him dizzy. Something cooled his chin. Spittle, he realized. Then blackness. A curtain of it was drawn across the light, then opened again. They were going to die. This notion, poignant though it was, seemed nonsensical. A verity. He edited the thought. *He* was going to die, *Margery* was going to die, *Tomás* was going to die. Gammage, too... perhaps. There was nothing he could do about it. He lifted his head a second time and, trying to ignore dizziness, the whining in his ears, the sense that his head contained a volume of liquid sloshing back and forth, he did his best to focus. After staring at Tomás for several seconds, subtracting his wobbliness and the general spin of things from what he saw, he became certain that the old man had stopped breathing. The blood seeping from his scalp had congealed. Weighted down by despair, the colonel let his head fall and grew thoughtless. His consciousness directed toward twinges, aches, fluctuations in pain. He resolved not to tell Carbonell anything. It was the only choice that remained. Not an easy resolution to keep, but Tomás obviously had done so. His eyelids drooped, and he thought he might be slipping away; then he felt a delicate pressure on his chest, a pressure unrelated to pain, and saw the indigo lizard clinging to his jacket, its orange eyes less than six inches away from his own.

"Go away," said the colonel, not rejecting the lizard so much as embracing rejection, recognizing this to be his sustaining principle.

The lizard scooted closer. Comical in its wide-eyed fixation. Provoked by some deep systemic injury, the colonel's body triggered a wave of numbness; his breath sobbed forth. The lizard stretched toward him, as if attracted by a new scent. The colonel did not know what he should do. Something, he felt, was required of him. The word Magic appeared on his mental screen. Orange letters outlined in pink and radiating a neonlike glow. Then a thought about Tomás dragged its shadow across the word, erasing it. He suddenly hated the lizard, perceived it as emblematic of his guilt. Unable to shout for fear of alerting Carbonell, he bugged his eyes, hoping to infuse his stare with sufficient venom to frighten it. The lizard inched closer yet, and the colonel pushed his face toward it, going nose-to-nose. This particularized view of its miniature saurian snout and pebbly skin defanged his hatred. He had a giddy apprehension of kinship, of life confronting life. What do you want? he thought. He made a mantra of the question, repeating it over and over. As suddenly as he had hated it, he now desired the lizard to be what Tomás had said it was: a singular event that was his alone to explore.

"Whatever..." he began.

He had been about to say something on the order of, "Whatever thing you want of me, whatever you must do, now is the time to let it be known," more a foxhole utterance than a devout entreaty. Before he could finish the thought, however, as had happened that first night in Puerto Morada, a lightness pervaded his body and he was blinded by a flash of orange radiance, and he saw a pair of enormous eyes, the bridge of a huge nose. But this time, instead of being restored to a more typical perspective, his field of vision began to shift, changing so rapidly that he barely registered the details. He found himself moving at a jittery pace, heading toward a red column that angled up on the diagonal from a rough wood surface. Then he was ascending the column; then he was turned briefly upside down; then he was atop a wide red wooden expanse, proceeding toward a tall pale man in his shirtsleeves, standing in front of a corrugated metal door, smoking a cigarette.

The colonel had no doubt that his vantage point was atop one of the picnic tables on the deck and that the man was Carbonell; and, although

it was difficult to credit, he had very little doubt that he was seeing this from the perspective of an indigo lizard with orange eyes. Had he been able to think clearly, he might have been more rigorous in his doubt, but the fact was, he could scarcely think at all. It seemed he had undergone a compression, the entire complexity of his mind shriveled to a point of observance, the memory of pain, and the will to act in some direction...a direction not yet manifest. Everything else, even the fear that would naturally attend such a transference, had been subsumed.

Once again the lizard — and the colonel with it — began to move. Down from the table, across the deck, and out onto the sand. He was becoming oriented to the lizard's wide field of vision, the hand-held camera effect of its paddling run, and was thus able to recognize that the white valleys through which he skipped and skittered were dimples in the sand, and that the forestlike fringe ahead was the grass at the foot of a cashew tree. He was vaguely aware of the light, the noise of wind and sea, and acutely aware of a spectrum of lesser noises, tiny ticks and hisses and scuttlings. Bitterly alluring scents came to him, and as he darted into the grass, he realized he was hungry. Fiercely hungry. The need to satisfy his hunger was becoming paramount, yet he knew that this was wrong. Something was required of him. Something important. Exerting his remnant of will, he pushed hunger aside and heard a trebly ratcheting sound, a cry that seemed to issue from inside him. He was running now, scooting along through grass and across moonstruck patches of sand, into frills of restless shadow, continuing to emit that thin cry. To what end he did this, the colonel could not guess, he only knew it accorded with his sense of responsibility. Hunger returned to goad him, but each time he managed to repress it, reminding himself of the trust placed in him, no matter its indeterminate nature, and finally, buoyed by a feeling of accomplishment, he went scurrying back across the dimpled, grainy surface of the world and saw before him the steps of the Drive-in Puerto Rico.

The man in shirtsleeves was no longer on the deck; but his feet were visible through a gap between the floorboards and the metal door. From the colonel's vantage on the railing he spotted a smaller man standing perhaps fifty feet away, half-obsured in the shadow of the palms. The colonel heard himself emit another ratcheting cry, then another and

another yet, and the man began to shake his legs and arms with extreme agitation. He shouted, his voice shredded by the torment of wind and surf, he staggered away from the palms and into the light, followed by a dark tide that flowed in a channel to his feet, up his legs to his back and chest, and then his face. He whirled madly, blindly, grabbing at the air, plucking at himself, and fell. He scrambled to hands and knees, but fell again, and the tide — composed, the colonel understood, of little four-footed ribbons with tails — washed over him, mounding higher and higher until the man was hidden beneath a dome of writhing, wriggling bits of flesh. Off along the beach, similar tides were filming out from the margin of the grass onto the sand, and as the colonel looked on, the stretch of bone-colored beach leading away from the restaurant was gradually eroded, transformed inch by inch into a stretch of dark seething life, gleaming faintly and then going all to shadow under the glow of the inconstant Moon.

Atop his railing, the colonel experienced an appreciation of power that verged on the religious, as if he were the focal point not only of the infinite army of lizards now surrounding the Drive-in Puerto Rico, but of the sky and sea, the tumultuous wind, and the electric principle of the distant storm whose gentlest edge helped to choreograph the moment. He seemed to remember other moments, brighter ones, a bright blue scatter of occasions, when he had felt much the same, high and solitary, deadly weapons at his command...though none so pure, so devoid of hesitancy. With a ratcheting cry, he announced himself to his troops, not yet summoning them to act. Then the metal door rolled up and the man against whom his army was arrayed stepped onto the deck and lit a cigarette. He stood for a second, making sure that his smoke was going, then rolled down the door, hiding the two bloody figures slumped within. He sat at the end of a bench, resting an elbow on the railing, his cigarette coal brightening and fading, the picture of a man taking his ease after a spate of hard work, watching the sea and thinking about some trivial thing, an appointment, a debt owed, a soccer match. Serene in the midst of tribulation. An absolutely ordinary man, even to the blood on his hands.

The colonel gave his order.

The army's scuttling rush was out-voiced by wind and water, and Carbonell did not notice he was under attack until a vanguard of anoles swarmed onto his leg. He jumped up, beating at them, his face aghast. But

upon seeing the rest of the army, the instant before they, too, swarmed over him, he seemed less frightened than bewildered, suggesting that while an assault of several dozen was alarming, an aggression perpetrated by thousands, millions, posed a mystery to be considered. Lizards sheathed his limbs six and seven deep, hampering the flailing of his arms. He wore momentarily a lizardskin cap that slipped down over his face and unraveled, the separate threads of it nipping at his eyes and darting into his mouth when he screamed — he bit down, spat out fragments of meat and skin, clamped his lips, trying to walk with legs made cumbersome by hip-high boots of squirming flesh, then fell, striking his head on the corner of a bench and lay still while the army mounded atop him, building its dome ever higher...until the colonel, who had scuttled to the edge of a table overlooking Carbonell, ordered them to stop.

The colonel peered down at his fallen enemy. His head exposed, body buried beneath a mound equal in height to the roof of the restaurant, Carbonell might have been one of his own victims. The humor of his right eye was burst, the tissue beneath it had been worried bloody; the eyelid itself was missing. His lips were chewed ragged, as was the strip of cartilage dividing his nostrils. But he was alive. Breath shuddered out of him. His good eye fluttered open. He tried to scream, but perhaps the weight on his chest was too great to allow the full expansion of his lungs, and the guttering sound that issued from his throat was almost inaudible. He rolled his eye, as if hoping to find an avenue of sight that offered promise. In doing so, he locked stares with the colonel. From that exchange, he must have gained no encouraging impression, for he immediately set to twisting his shoulders about, trying to work them free. Once he recognized the impossibility of this, he closed his eye and grimaced, straining upward against the weight. After half a minute or thereabouts, he desisted and allowed his head, which had been lifted in the effort, to fall back. He looked in his submission as if he were under a peaceful charm, a magical creature guarded in his sleep by the clever reptilian faces peeking from his hair.

A bright green lizard, barely an inch long, perhaps a day or two out of the egg, came to explore his left ear, inserting itself into the inner canal. Suddenly agitated, Carbonell redoubled his efforts to escape, heaving against the weight of the mound, shaking his head wildly, and the little

green one partially withdrew. A much larger lizard, gray with a sagittal crest and spots of brighter color on its throat, placed the tip of its snout in the crease between Carbonell's lips, giving rise to the notion that should the mouth open, it would be prepared to slip inside and slither down the throat. A striped lizard with an alligator-like head flattened against his cheek, as did a pale brown chameleon; several others arranged themselves on his brow. It looked as though his face were the subject of a primitive design. He kept very still. Only when a blue skink stuck its head into a nostril, plugging it, did he react, twitching, huffing, attempting to expel it. When the second nostril was plugged by a second skink, he sucked in air through the corners of his mouth. Three tiny lizards — babies, it appeared — joined the large grayish-green sentry at his lips, seeking to push inside, and soon dozens more skittered down from the mound to englobe his head, covering it completely. At this juncture Carbonell abandoned himself to terror, twisting his neck with such force, it appeared he had in mind to unscrew it from his body. He took once again to shaking his head, then to beating it against the boards. Whether as a last futile exercise or an attempt to knock himself out, it was difficult to say. Whatever the level of his desperation, the battering grew faster and faster, coming to seem a convulsive movement and not in the least controlled, the autonomic reaction of a system in the throes of shutting down. Eventually, abruptly, it ceased.

As the army made its disorganized retreat, flowing off across the sand in gradually dwindling streams, a black lake draining into rivulets and animated puddles, the colonel lost interest in the corpse and went pattering over the boards and beneath the metal door and up the leg of a barstool, then onto a trouserleg and higher, until he was gazing at a pair of enormous eyes directly above him. The eyes were shut, and this frustrated the colonel. Unclear as to how he should proceed, he gave in to hunger and started to descend, intent upon returning to the grass, where he had scented food. But as he clung to the trouser cuff, preparing to drop to the floor, it occurred to him that his duty was not done. There was one thing more left to do. He scooted back up to hang beneath those lidded eyes, awaiting an opportunity for dutiful action.

Over the next minutes, ten of them at least, and each one seeming longer than average, the urge to hunt became increasingly powerful, but

he succeeded in resisting it, demanding of himself a familiar rigor, growing comfortable with denial. It was as if some old discipline were helping to armor him against the depredations of repetition and boredom. He involved himself in examining the oily creases in the skin surrounding the eyes, the shallow fissures in the lips, the graying stubble sprouting above them. Turning back to the eyes he found that they had come partly open, but the irises were angled upward, as if about to slide back beneath the lids. He crept higher, extending his neck so that his snout was scant millimeters from the right eye, and gave a grating cry. The lid shuttered down, then up; the eye shifted, focused on him, and after a brief period of disorientation, he came to feel sodden and dull. Agony lanced his knee, like a lightning bolt expelled from an all-encompassing ache. Staring at him, its snout almost touching his skin, was an indigo lizard with orange eyes. The colonel recalled the lizard hanging in this exact position earlier that evening and could not imagine how it had managed to remain there throughout the beating that he had received. Less reasonable memories sprang to mind, muddying his understanding of what had taken place. He wanted to look about and locate Carbonell, but was afraid to move. Everything inside him felt broken, contused. Nevertheless, he raised his eyes and saw the rolled-down door. Which meant that Carbonell must be outside. Smoking and talking to his sergeant. Another memory surfaced...or not a memory. A dream. Carbonell's face with one eye missing, a pulp of blood and tissue occupying its place. Startled, half-convinced it was not a dream, the colonel straightened. The exertion brought dark shapes swimming up to cloud his vision. The glare of the lamp beside him grew wavering and pointy like a Christmas star...dimming, receding. Pain spiked his temple, and he went sliding away from the world in the grip of an irresistible slippage.

DURING THE colonel's first week in the hospital, he received many visitors and learned many things. He learned that Tomás was dead, as he had feared, and that Margery had been released, thanks to the actions of a young lieutenant, Jaime Arguello, who had been proclaimed a national hero for his single-handed assault on the barracks where she had been held by soldiers loyal to the traitor, Carbonell. "Traitor" was what the

newspapers called him now that his atrocities had become newsworthy. Policemen asked questions of the colonel, most of which he was unable to answer. His memories had been beaten out of him, but the process of questioning dredged up a few details and the policemen supplied others. For instance, when asking about Carbonell's death, one of the policemen told the colonel that the autopsy had revealed several lizards in Carbonell's esophagus and wanted to know how this might have occurred. The colonel had no information on the subject, but he recalled the indigo lizard and had the idea that it had played some part in the event. When he said as much to the representative of the air force who came to gauge his fitness for duty, the representative appeared to view the statement as a symptom of unsoundness — two days later the colonel received notification that he was to be retired on full pension, this an entirely misleading term for the pittance he was due.

Having no real income and no prospects, alienated from his family, the colonel's view of the future, never rosy, turned bleak indeed. In the bathroom mirror he observed that the lines in his face had deepened and that the gray in his hair, formerly a salting, had spread to cover his entire scalp. He was old. Grown old in a single terrible night. What possible future could he have? But during his second week in the hospital, he was visited by a lawyer bearing Tomas's will and the deed to the Drive-in Puerto Rico, who informed him that he, Mauricio Galpa, was now sole owner and proprietor of the restaurant. This legacy caused the colonel — until that moment benumbed by his experiences — to weep and to remember all the kindnesses done him by Tomás, and then to think that perhaps the old man, too, had played a part in what had happened. He tried to piece it all out, but medication and headaches impeded thought and he made little progress.

Several days before he was released from the hospital, he received a phone call from Margery in the States. She thanked him effusively for what he had done to help Gammage and said that she had wanted to see him, but the news bureau, fearing for her safety, had flown her out of the country; and now the government — the colonel's government — had declared her *persona non grata*.

"I tried to call you," she said. "But I couldn't get through until today."

"I'm glad you're safe," the colonel said.

"Sooner or later they'll grant me another visa. Then I'll come visit."

"That would be nice."

"This is so...", She made a frustrated noise. "I hate the telephone."

The colonel waited for her to continue.

"I know there was something between us," she said. "Not just a moment. Something I'd like to understand. You know?"

"I felt something, too," the colonel said.

"Maybe you could visit me."

"I'll be undergoing treatment for a while. Physical therapy. But yes, it's a possibility."

"You sound so distant."

"It's the pills. They give me so many pills, it's hard to think." He reached for a glass of water on the bed table and took a sip. "What are you doing now?"

"Oh...I'm going to be flying to Israel next week. We're doing a piece on the elections. The period leading up to them."

"Israel. That's very far away."

"I'll only be there a month."

A vague emotion possessed the colonel, a nondescript sadness that seemed attached to no specific thing, but to all things, like weather blown in from the sea.

"They're paging me. I have to go," Margery said. "But we'll get together. I'll come visit you. I promise."

"I know," said the colonel.

The day before he was released, the colonel hired a man to transfer his belongings to Tomas's room behind the Drive-in Puerto Rico, and the next morning, dressed in civilian clothes, going slowly with his cane, having to stop every couple of minutes to restore his equilibrium and catch his breath, he walked down to the beach and sat on the deck of the restaurant, watching the placid sea. Inside the break the water was the color of aquamarine; beyond it, a dark lapis lazuli. Gulls skied against the blue heavens, and confections of white cloud, bubbled like meringue, moved leisurely west to east along the horizon. Combers plumed at the seaward end of Punta Manabique. The glorious peace of the day overwhelmed the colonel. He rested his head in his hands, his mind flocked with things half felt and half remembered, with shades of sorrow, bright spikes of relief.

Tears filled his eyes. He wiped them away and, steadier, he unlocked the corrugated metal door, rolled it up, and stepped into the restaurant.

The place had been cleaned, the bar stools washed free of blood and set in a neat row, and there was a note from Tomas's girl, who signed herself Incarnacion, giving her telephone number and saying that she would be ready to work whenever he needed her. But it was the rear wall that held the colonel's notice — the mural was missing. Gone. The lime green background color did not appear to have been painted over, but the volcanoes and cruise ships and Carbonell's face and the gray airplane, they were all gone...except for the image of an indigo lizard high in the left-hand corner. The colonel was unclear about many things, but he was certain the image of the lizard had previously occupied the lower right-hand corner of the wall. He did not find this dissonance as disturbing as once he might. It seemed that by way of compensation for his lack of clarity concerning his personal life, he was now able to grasp some of what Tomás had told him over the years and, though he could not have articulated it at the time, he recognized a strange circularity in the events that had led to his ownership of the restaurant.

He switched on the generator to cool the beer, made coffee, and, taking a cup, returned to the deck. In the verge of the palms, humming-birds blurred the air above a hibiscus bush; the breeze wafted steam from his cup. A lapidary fineness of well-being settled about the colonel, as if land and sea and air had conformed to his physical shape and emotional configuration, and he thought of what Tomás had said about finding a place you knew was yours. It did not escape him that the old man might have known more than he had claimed about the world and magic, that he might have anticipated their fates, and may even have had a hand in directing them. Nor did the colonel fail to acknowledge the significance of the vanished mural, the blank wall that had been left for him, perhaps, to fill with his own images. Once he would have sought to explain this away, to debunk any less than traditionally rational explanation; but now he wanted to understand it, and he realized that in order to do so he would first have to accept the uniqueness of the circumstance.

Approaching from the direction of the colonel's hotel, a man drew near and ascended the steps of the deck. Young, dark with the blood of the Miskitia; carrying a lieutenant's dress jacket and hat. "Is it too early?" he asked.

"I have coffee," said the colonel. "And some pastries...though they may be stale. This is my first day. I've had no time to organize."

"*Bueno...café.*" The young man sat at a table removed by two from the colonel. He leaned against the railing and let his head fall back. The strain that had been apparent in his face dissolved. "*Diós!* The sun feels good."

"Would you mind serving yourself?" The colonel indicated his bad knee. "I have an injury."

The young man went inside and poured a coffee. On his return, after a moment's hesitation, he sat on the bench opposite the colonel. He offered a friendly smile, blew steam from his cup. His mustache had not grown in fully, like the mustache of a pubescent boy, yet lines of stress tiered his brow and his eyes seemed worn, like dark coins from which the symbols of the realm had been effaced.

"What brings you out so early?" the colonel asked.

"I couldn't sleep in my hotel. It's all the reporters, the officials. They keep me awake half the night, and afterward I can't sleep."

"Reporters? Are you famous?"

"No, I...No. I'm only doing some appearances. Publicity for the army. They tell me I'll be back with my unit in a month or two."

"That's not so long."

"You have no idea how long a single day with these people can last."

"I can imagine," said the colonel. "Surely there must be some benefit attendant to these appearances."

"The girls." The young man smiled shyly. "That part of it's all right."

The colonel laughed, then introduced himself as Mauricio.

"*Mucho gusto,*" said the young man. "Jaime."

They began to speak of other matters. The weather, the fishing, the quality of the national soccer team, the girls of Puerto Morada. And though the colonel suspected that the young man was his country's latest hero, perhaps the next in a curious tradition of heroes whose lives were somehow connected to this stretch of beach with its hummingbirds, lizards, and wandering cows, he did not invest the notion with much thought and immersed himself in the conversation.

The sun climbed higher, warmth cored the colonel's bones. The sky paled to an eggshell blue, the swells beyond the break grew heavier. A

shadow glided through the water near Punta Manabique. He could not tell if it was a manta ray, but the shadow was itself validation of a kind, implying that beneath the surface of things there was always a beautiful monster waiting to rise.

"Do you think there are places that know us?" he asked the young man, and in asking the question, he felt the presence of Tomás, felt his old friend's amiable yet pointed inquisitiveness occupying his flesh like a perfume, then drifting on, but leaving its trace. "It is a common enough question to ask if one knows such and such a place. 'Do you know Fuengirola? Do you know Roatán?' But do they have a sense of us? I wonder. Does their vitality affect us in ways we cannot conceive?"

The young man looked puzzled. "Are you implying that we are acted upon by the ground beneath our feet? I don't believe it. Our fates are not controlled by mysterious forces. A man carries his fate with him."

"That was not precisely my implication. But I must say I'm not so certain of things as you appear to be. I am beginning to believe there are places made for us in this world, and if we find them, we may understand patterns in our lives, in all life, that are immune to straightforward analysis."

A tall black woman in a red blouse and a denim skirt emerged from the sea grape beside the restaurant, bearing atop her head a bowl covered by a white cloth, and began walking along the beach toward the town, establishing a human comparative to the swaying of the palms — this graceful juxtaposition of man and nature caused the colonel to contrast his generally dismaying impression of the world with his impression of it now.

"This place, for instance," he said. "I have only been here a short time, but already I know a few things I did not know before."

The young man, who had been staring apprehensively toward the hotel, turned to him, his face once more full of strain, and said, "I'm sorry... I was preoccupied. You said something about this place? I don't think I understood you."

A breeze drifted the grit that had accumulated on the tabletop, rearranging the grains into a slender crescent of glittering specks, and though some small portion of the colonel's mind resisted the idea, he imagined a similar shift must have happened inside him, that all the grit

of his desultory past had been realigned to suit a larger purpose and a simpler design. He wanted to deny this, but to do so he would have had to deny the feeling that then engulfed him. A feeling of calm satisfaction, of happiness. He had an urge to confide in the young man, to explain the simplicity of the thing it had taken him nearly twenty years to learn; but he realized that the years were necessary to the lesson.

"It's not important," he said, patting the young man's hand. "It is enough to understand that whatever comes to you in life, you will always find a welcome here."



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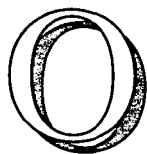
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Ursula Le Guin recently joined the ranks of John Updike, Alice Munro, Joyce Carol Oates, and Eudora Welty as a winner of the PEN/Malamud Award, an honor established by the family of the late Bernard Malamud to honor excellence in the art of the short story. Her past contributions to our pages, including "Buffalo Gals, Won't You Come Out Tonight," "The Barrow," "Darkrose and Diamond," and the title story for her most recent collection of short fiction, The Birthday of the World, certainly bear out the fact that she deserves such honors. Here we bring you a new short one, a think piece that's slated to appear in her next book, Changing Planes.

Social Dreaming of the Frin

By Ursula K. Le Guin



ON THE FRINTHIAN PLANE dreams are not private property. There is no such thing as a dream of one's own. A troubled Frin has no need to lie on a couch recounting dreams to a psychoanalyst, for the doctor already knows what the patient dreamed last night, because the doctor dreamed it too; and the patient also dreamed what the doctor dreamed; and so did everyone else in the neighborhood.

To escape from the dreams of others or to have a secret dream, the Frin must go out alone into the wilderness. And even in the wilderness, their sleep may be invaded by the strange dream-visions of lions, antelope, bears, or mice.

While awake, and during much of their sleep, the Frin are as dream-deaf as we are. Only sleepers who are in or approaching REM sleep can participate in the dreams of others also in REM sleep.

REM is an acronym for "rapid eye movement," a visible accompaniment of this stage of sleep; its signal in the brain is a characteristic type

of electro-encephalic wave. Most of our rememberable dreams occur during REM sleep.

Frinthian REM sleep and that of people on our plane yield very similar EEG traces, though there are some significant differences, in which may lie the key to their ability to share dreams.

To share, the dreamers must be fairly close to one another. The carrying power of the average Frinthian dream is about that of the average human voice. A dream can be received easily within a hundred-meter radius, and bits and fragments of it may carry a good deal farther. A strong dream in a solitary place may well carry for two kilometers or even farther.

In a lonely farmhouse a Frin's dreams mingle only with those of the rest of the family, along with echoes, whiffs, and glimpses of what the cattle in the barn and the dog dozing on the doorstep hear, smell, and see in their sleep.

In a village or town, with people asleep in all the houses round, the Frin spend at least part of every night in a shifting phantasmagoria of their own and other people's dreams which I find it hard to imagine.

I asked an acquaintance in a small town to tell me any dreams she could recall from the past night. At first she demurred, saying that they'd all been nonsense, and only "strong" dreams ought to be thought about and talked over. She was evidently reluctant to tell me, an outsider, things that had been going on in her neighbors' heads. I managed at last to convince her that my interest was genuine and not voyeuristic. She thought a while and said, "Well, there was a woman — it was me in the dream, or sort of me, but I think it was the mayor's wife's dream, actually, they live at the corner — this woman, anyhow, and she was trying to find a baby that she'd had last year. She had put the baby into a dresser drawer and forgotten all about it, and now I was, she was, feeling worried about it — Had it had anything to eat? Since last year? O my word, how stupid we are in dreams! And then, oh, yes, then there was an awful argument between a naked man and a dwarf, they were in an empty cistern. That may have been my own dream, at least to start with. Because I know that cistern. It was on my grandfather's farm where I used to stay when I was a child. But they both turned into lizards, I think. And then — oh yes!" — she laughed — "I was being squashed by a pair of giant breasts, huge ones, with pointy nipples. I think that was the teenage boy next door, because

I was terrified but kind of ecstatic, too. And what else was there? Oh, a mouse, it looked so delicious, and it didn't know I was there, and I was just about to pounce, but then there was a horrible thing, a nightmare — a face without any eyes — and huge, hairy hands groping at me — and then I heard the three-year-old next door screaming, because I woke up too. That poor child has so many nightmares, she drives us all crazy. Oh, I don't really like thinking about that one. I'm glad you forget most dreams. Wouldn't it be awful if you had to remember them all!"

Dreaming is a cyclical, not a continuous activity, and so in small communities there are hours when one's sleep-theater, if one may call it so, is dark. REM sleep among settled, local groups of Frin tends to synchronize. As the cycles peak, about five times a night, several or many dreams may be going on simultaneously in everybody's head, intermingling and influencing one another with their mad, inarguable logic, so that (as my friend in the village described it) the baby turns up in the cistern and the mouse hides between the breasts, while the eyeless monster disappears in the dust kicked up by a pig trotting past through a new dream, perhaps a dog's, since the pig is rather dimly seen, but is smelt with enormous particularity. But after such episodes comes a period when everyone can sleep in peace, without anything exciting happening at all.

In Frinthian cities, where one may be within dream-range of hundreds of people every night, the layering and overlap of insubstantial imagery is, I'm told, so continual and so confusing that the dreams cancel out, like brushfuls of colors slapped one over the other without design; even one's own dream blurs at once into the meaningless commotion, as if projected on a screen where a hundred films were already being shown, their soundtracks all running together. Only occasionally does a gesture, a voice, ring clear for a moment, or a particularly vivid wet dream or ghastly nightmare cause all the sleepers in a neighborhood to sigh, ejaculate, shudder, or wake up with a gasp.

Frin whose dreams are mostly troubling or disagreeable say they like living in the city for the very reason that their dreams are all but lost in the "stew," as they call it. But others are upset by the constant oneiric noise and dislike spending even a few nights in a metropolis. "I hate to dream strangers' dreams!" my village informant told me. "Ugh! When I

come back from staying in the city, I wish I could wash out the inside of my head!"

EVEN ON OUR PLANE, young children often have trouble understanding that the experiences they had just before they woke up aren't "real." It must be far more bewildering for Frinthian children, into whose innocent sleep enter the sensations and preoccupations of adults — accidents relived, griefs renewed, rapes reenacted, wrathful conversations with people fifty years in the grave. But adult Frin are ready to answer children's questions about the shared dreams and to discuss them, defining them always as dream, though not as unreal. There is no word corresponding to "unreal" in Frinthian; the nearest is "bodiless." So the children learn to live with adults' incomprehensible memories, unmentionable acts, and inexplicable emotions, much as do children who grow up on our plane amid the terrible incoherence of civil war or in times of plague and famine; or, indeed, children anywhere, at any time. Children learn what is real and what isn't, what to notice and what to ignore, as a survival tactic, a means of staying alive. It is hard for an outsider to judge, but my impression of Frinthian children is that they mature early, psychologically; and by the age of seven or eight they are treated by adults as equals.

As for the animals, no one knows what they make of the human dreams they evidently participate in. The domestic beasts of the Frin seemed to me to be remarkably pleasant, trustful, and intelligent. They are generally well looked after. The fact that they share their dreams with their animals might explain why the Frin use animals to haul and plow and for milk and wool, but not as meat.

The Frin say that animals are more sensitive dream-receivers than human beings, and can receive dreams even from people from other planes. Frinthian farmers have assured me that their cattle and swine are deeply disturbed by visits from people from carnivorous planes. When I stayed at a farm in Enya Valley the chicken-house was in an uproar half the night. I thought it was a fox, but my hosts said it was me.

People who have mingled their dreams all their lives say they are often uncertain where a dream began, whether it was originally theirs or

somebody else's; but within a family or village the author of a particularly erotic or ridiculous dream may be all too easily identified. People who know one another well can recognize the source-dreamer from the tone or events of the dream, its style. But after all, it has become their own as they dream it. Each dream may be shaped differently in each mind. And, as with us, the personality of the dreamer, the oneiric I, is often tenuous, strangely disguised, or unpredictably different from the daylight person. Very puzzling dreams or those with powerful emotional affect may be discussed on and off all day by the community, without the origin of the dream ever being mentioned.

But most dreams, as with us, are forgotten at waking. Dreams elude their dreamers, on every plane.

It might seem to us that the Frin have very little psychic privacy; but they are protected by this common amnesia, as well as by doubt as to any particular dream's origin, and by the obscurity of dream itself. And their dreams are truly common property. The sight of a red and black bird pecking at the ear of a bearded human head lying on a plate on a marble table and the rush of almost gleeful horror that accompanied it — did that come from Aunt Unia's sleep, or Uncle Tu's, or Grandfather's, or the cook's, or the girl next door's? A child might ask, "Auntie, did you dream that head?" The stock answer is, "We all did." Which is, of course, the truth.

Frinthian families and small communities are close-knit and generally harmonious, though quarrels and feuds occur. The research group from Mills College that traveled to the Frinthian plane to record and study oneiric brainwave synchrony agreed that (like the synchronization of menstrual and other cycles within groups on our plane) communal dreaming may serve to strengthen the social bond. They did not speculate as to its psychological or moral effects.

From time to time a Frin is born with unusual powers of projecting and receiving dreams — never one without the other. The Frin call such a dreamer whose "signal" is unusually clear and powerful a strong mind. That strong-minded dreamers can receive dreams from non-Frinthian humans is a proven fact. Some of them apparently can share dreams with fish, with insects, even with trees. A legendary strong mind named Du Ir claimed that he "dreamed with the mountains and the rivers," but his boast is generally regarded as poetry.

Strong minds are recognized even before birth, when the mother begins to dream that she lives in a warm, amber-colored palace without directions or gravity, full of shadows and complex rhythms and musical vibrations, and shaken often by slow peaceful earthquakes — a dream the whole community enjoys, though late in the pregnancy it may be accompanied by a sense of pressure, of urgency, that rouses claustrophobia in some.

As the strong-minded child grows, its dreams reach two or three times farther than those of ordinary people, and tend to override or co-opt local dreams going on at the same time. The nightmares and inchoate, passionate deliria of a strong-minded child who is sick, abused, or unhappy can disturb everyone in the neighborhood, even in the next village. Such children, therefore, are treated with care; every effort is made to make their life one of good cheer and disciplined serenity. If the family is incompetent or uncaring, the village or town may intervene, the whole community earnestly seeking to ensure the child peaceful days and nights of pleasant dreams.

"World-strong minds" are legendary figures, whose dreams supposedly came to everyone in the world, and who therefore also dreamed the dreams of everyone in the world. Such men and women are revered as holy people, ideals and models for the strong dreamers of today. The moral pressure on strong-minded people is in fact intense, and so must be the psychic pressure. None of them lives in a city: they would go mad, dreaming a whole city's dreams. Mostly they gather in small communities where they live very quietly, widely dispersed from one another at night, practicing the art of "dreaming well," which mostly means dreaming harmlessly. But some of them become guides, philosophers, visionary leaders.

There are still many tribal societies on the Frinthian plane, and the Mills researchers visited several. They reported that among these peoples, strong minds are regarded as seers or shamans, with the usual perquisites and penalties of such eminence. If during a famine the tribe's strong mind dreams of traveling clear down the river and feasting by the sea, the whole tribe may share the vision of the journey and the feast so vividly, with such conviction, that they decide to pack up and start downriver. If they find food along the way, or shellfish and edible seaweeds on the beach, their

strong mind gets rewarded with the choice bits; but if they find nothing or run into trouble with other tribes, the seer, now called "twisted mind," may be beaten or driven out.

The elders told the researchers that tribal councils usually follow the guidance of dream only if other indications favor it. The strong minds themselves urge caution. A seer among the Eastern zhud-Byu told the researchers, "This is what I say to my people: Some dreams tell us what we wish to believe. Some dreams tell us what we fear. Some dreams are of what we know though we may not know we knew it. The rarest dream is the dream that tells us what we did not know."

Frinthia has been open to other planes for over a century, but the rural scenery and quiet lifestyle have brought no great influx of visitors. Many tourists avoid the plane under the impression that the Frin are a race of "mindsuckers" and "psychovoyeurs."

Most Frin are still farmers, villagers, or town-dwellers, but the cities and their material technologies are growing fast. Though technologies and techniques can be imported only with the permission of the All-Frin government, requests for such permission by Frinthian companies and individuals have become increasingly frequent. Many Frin welcome this growth of urbanism and materialism, justifying it as the result of the interpretation of dreams received by their strong minds from visitors from other planes. "People came here with strange dreams," says the historian Tubar of Kaps, himself a strong mind. "Our strongest minds joined in them, and joined us with them. So we all began to see things we had never dreamed of. Vast gatherings of people, cybernets, ice cream, much commerce, many pleasant belongings and useful artifacts. 'Shall these remain only dreams?' we said. 'Shall we not bring these things into wakeful being?' So we have done that."

Other thinkers take a more dubious attitude toward alien hypnogogia. What troubles them most is that the dreaming is not reciprocal. For though a strong mind can share the dreams of an alien visitor and "broadcast" them to other Frin, nobody from another plane has been capable of sharing the dreams of the Frin. We cannot enter their nightly festival of fantasies. We are not on their wavelength.

The investigators from Mills hoped to be able to reveal the mechanism by which communal dreaming is effected, but they failed, as

Frinthian scientists have also failed, so far. "Telepathy," much hyped in the literature of the interplanary travel agents, is a label, not an explanation. Researchers have established that the genetic programming of all Frinthian mammals includes the capacity for dream-sharing, but its operation, though clearly linked to the brainwave synchrony of sleepers, remains obscure. Visiting foreigners do not synchronize; they do not participate in that nightly ghost-chorus of electric impulses dancing to the same beat. But unwittingly, unwillingly — like a deaf child shouting — they send out their own dreams to the strong minds asleep nearby. And to many of the Frin, this seems not so much a sharing as a pollution or infection.

"The purpose of our dreams," says the philosopher Sorrdja of Farfrit, a strong dreamer of the ancient Deyu Retreat, "is to enlarge our souls by letting us imagine all that can be imagined: to release us from the tyranny and bigotry of the individual self by letting us feel the fears, desires, and delights of every mind in every living body near us." The duty of the strong-minded person, she holds, is to strengthen dreams, to focus them — not with a view to practical results or new inventions, but as a means of understanding the world through a myriad of experiences and sentiences (not only human). The dreams of the greatest dreamers may offer to those who share them a glimpse of an order underlying all the chaotic stimuli, responses, acts, words, intentions, imaginings of daily and nightly existence.

"In the day we are apart," she says. "In the night we are together. We should follow our own dreams, not those of strangers who cannot join us in the dark. With such people we can talk; we can learn from them and teach them. We should do so, for that is the way of the daylight. But the way of the night is different. We go together then, apart from them. The dream we dream is our road through the night. They know our day, but not our night, nor the ways we go there. Only we can find our own way, showing one another, following the lantern of the strong mind, following our dreams in darkness."

The resemblance of Sorrdja's phrase "road through the night" to Freud's "royal road to the unconscious" is interesting but, I believe, superficial. Visitors from my plane have discussed psychological theory with the Frin, but neither Freud's nor Jung's views of dream are of much

interest to them. The Frinthian "royal road" is trodden not by one secret soul but a multitude. Repressed feelings, however distorted, disguised, and symbolic, are the common property of everybody in one's household and neighborhood. The Frinthian unconscious, collective or individual, is not a dark wellspring buried deep under years of evasions and denials, but a kind of great moonlit lake to whose shores everybody comes to swim together naked every night.

And so the interpretation of dreams is not, among the Frin, a means of self-revelation, of private psychic inquiry and readjustment. It is not even species-specific, since animals share the dreams, though only the Frin can talk about them.

For them, dream is a communion of all the sentient creatures in the world. It puts the notion of self deeply into question. I can imagine only that for them to fall asleep is to abandon the self utterly, to enter or reenter into the limitless community of being, almost as death is for us. ¶





A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

LIVING IN AN ELEVEN-DIMENSIONAL WORLD

WE HAVE always thought of black holes as distant, shadowy phenomena, bizarrely crunching space-time around themselves. They trap huge masses, as great as those of stars, letting not even light escape their grasp.

Maybe not. To the surprise of many, we may quite soon find tiny black holes crashing into our upper atmosphere. And this way of possibly making microscopic black holes comes not from astronomy, but from an idea long the favorite of mathematicians — extra dimensions, beyond our humdrum three.

We begin with a simple picture: Smack particles together at high energies and see if a new kind of “particle” emerges. This is how high energy physics has proceeded for a century. Only this time the “particles” may be infinitesimal

black holes that last only an instant, allowing us a look at such exotic beasts — before they evaporate in a spray of energetic radiation.

This is the “Hawking radiation,” a jet of everything from light to nuclear matter — all coming from a point exactly like a very hot object, the dying black hole itself. This fountain of stuff is an effect Stephen Hawking first predicted in the early 1970s. He was thinking of large, star-sized black holes, but the effect can occur on any scale.

Black holes can have any size, so long as they have the appropriate enormous mass density. Alas, the great bulk of black hole theory has not been verified by experiment — yet. But now it appears that we might be able to conduct experiments without venturing far into the vacuum of space.

Recently particle physicists

studying very high energy cosmic rays (including Jonathan Feng, a colleague in the physics department here at UC-Irvine) have noticed that upcoming detectors could detect micro-black holes, and in so doing test the old question of how many dimensions our universe has.

Obviously, extra dimensions cannot be large enough for us to readily see. So we must think small.

In physics, tiny lengths demand going to very high energies. To test the existence of minute extra dimensions requires particles stupendously more energetic than anything we can make in the lab. So we can resort to the vast energies available from cosmic rays, which were made in equally impressive events: supernovas, or the new "hyper-novas" which may occur when stars collide, sending neutron stars plunging down the gullets of black holes. (Never underestimate the appetite of astrophysicists for ever-monstrous ideas.)

Whatever the origin of the most energetic cosmic rays, they might give us enough energy to study the whole issue of extra dimensions. Streaming into our atmosphere, cosmic ray protons have huge energies — as much as a thrown baseball, all packed into a single tiny particle. If they collide with the

protons in, say, the water of our upper atmosphere, they could spit out mini-holes that then expire in a twinkling.

It turns out that very energetic neutrinos, those "little neutral particles" that come from nuclear processes, seem to be the most effective in making tiny black holes as they lace through our atmosphere. They would send quick, horizontal jets across the sky. These would be made up of the stuff of nuclei themselves — quarks and gluons.

Particle detectors on the ground below might be able to see such singular flares. Searches for them will begin within a few years, when enough detectors are in place.

They would finally, if indirectly, confirm that black holes exist. We would find that showers of holes had been bursting over our heads all the time, unknown. Plus, we would have evidence of extra dimensions beyond our ordinary senses.

What are these dimensions and why should they be there?

First, they must be very small. In ordinary life, by waving your hand you're sweeping through the tiny dimensions without noticing them. Extra dimensions far smaller than an atomic nucleus could have

escaped the notice of even recent, high energy experiments.

The basic three dimensions we know: height, width, and depth. Edwin Abbott first expressed the idea of four dimensions (4D) in his founding 1884 novel *Flatland*. He built it upon ideas already present in mathematics, which treats the number of dimensions as arbitrary. Abbott framed a satirical novel in 2D to give perspective on social problems. Many others took up the idea, ascribing religious heft to 4D. It was where spiritual entities hung out and thus explained ghosts. As well, 4D gave God a way to see everything in our 3D universe at once — omniscience.

Since that era, this curious notion has drifted at the edge of scientific thinking — that our three-dimensional world might be embedded in a larger, spatially four-dimensional universe we cannot readily detect. We would be like an insect crawling over the surface of a basketball, eyes unable to see its true situation. Now many more dimensions have become the hottest idea in theoretical physics, with huge implications.

Physicists began envisioning higher dimensions because they got from the effort a simpler dynamic picture. Mathematically, some of

the basic equations describing our world look more elegant in higher dimensions. Principally, Einstein's general relativity theory acquires a graceful symmetry in 4D. But this comes at the price of apparent complication, too.

Why? More dimensions to deal with certainly strains the imagination, but can lead to beauties that theorists love, abstruse elegances. Einstein, in his 1916 mathematical theory of general relativity, invoked the simplicity that objects move in "geodesics" — undisturbed paths, the equivalent of a straight line in Euclidean, rectangular 3D geometry, or a great circle on a sphere — in a four-dimensional space-time. He gained clarity of concept in return for the complication of a higher dimension.

Matter curved his 4D space-time, an effect we know as gravity. A geodesic near a planet, then, is an orbit — an ellipse, not a straight line. Even though an object moving along this path that looks curved to us seems to be accelerated, it feels no acceleration — zero-g.

This way of thinking replaced a classical idea, force, with a modern geometrical view, curvature of a 4D world.

Now our hottest grand Theory Of Everything replaces Einstein's

picture of point particles moving in a geometric world with vibrating strings. They are like closed rubber bands of space-time, and are the basic objects that we see as particles. (Brian Greene's bestselling *The Elegant Universe* is a good introduction to this bewildering view of our universe.)

Such tiny objects have tension and so can hum with characteristic tones like piano strings. These timbres correspond to matter waves, giving the masses of elementary particles. Change the string tension and you get a different particle mass in the universe as we perceive it. Presto, string theory yields every particle we know, plus gravity (communicated by a particle called the "graviton") and even more. So this is a fresh underlying picture: a variety of tiny strings, each type strumming to a different celestial harmony — the music of masses.

And the payoff of extra dimensions? Just maybe, an explanation of literally Everything.

The trick is that these strings are incredibly tiny and live in an *eleven-dimensional* space — the four we are now used to, including time, plus seven more. Think of our 4D space-time as a sphere that is actually the boundary of a 5D

"bubble." The remaining five or six dimensions (there is some controversy about how many there might be) are curled up.

How come we don't see these tiny add-ons? Because they rolled up into infinitesimal size at the very birth of the Big Bang, so we haven't noticed them.

In *Flatland* Abbott made his 2D flatlanders "real" by adding a tiny height to them, so they do exist in our 3D world — though they don't know it. This was strikingly prescient. String theories use an analogy with a garden hose. From far away the hose looks like a 1D object, a looped string. But up close, we see that it has another dimension, perpendicular to the long direction. This direction is one of the extra dimensions, unobservably small — perhaps a billion billion billion times more tiny than an atom.

Perhaps we are living in a universe only apparently spatially three-dimensional. Infinitesimal but real dimensions lurk all about us. What's more, those dimensions are curled, so they never "unroll" to be visible to us.

What an odd picture — that you constantly move through the six invisible dimensions, wrapping around them many times, like an

insect circling that garden hose. You take no notice.

Why are the extra dimensions tiny? So far, this occurs by what some dismiss as "wantum mechanics" — we want it, so it must happen. Current theories have hand-waving explanations that roll up dimensions by tying them like a roll of dollar bills, with special strings like rubber bands.

Those strings are (we think) the same kind whose strumming vibrations set the masses and charges of particles. Here they have to play a further role, though, having tension that keeps those unsightly dimensions from unrolling and expanding our universe unimaginably. It is almost as if Creation began with the elegant form of eleven dimensions, which mathematicians love, and then had to seal off most of them. Exactly why, we don't know — just one of the arbitrary points of the theory. Indeed, until recently theorists thought that string theory dictated ten dimensions. They then found that mathematically, they could unify the subject better if there were eleven. The jury is still out on the exact number, though the majority favors eleven right now.

All this furious dimensional rolling up and organizing had to

happen sometime in the very early universe, too. Otherwise the universe would have dissipated the Big Bang into all the extra dimensions, exhausting the primordial energies that made our universe the size it is today. If the extra dimensions had been free to grow, the universe would have been over, energies spent, before our whole show got started.

Some such curling up must have happened. Without it we would have ended up with unworkable, chilly universes that could not support life.

For example, consider the field theories that tell us what particles can be in our universe. If they had more than three persisting (not rolled up) spatial dimensions, a simple calculation shows that there could be no stable atoms — and thus, no matter more complex than single particles.

Gravity itself gets unruly with more than three large spatial dimensions to operate in. Orbits of planets are unstable for 4D and higher — so there will be no solar systems, or even galaxies.

There are many reasons why substantial higher dimensions make trouble. Only in odd-numbered dimensions can waves propagate sharply, without weird

reverberations. Maybe that effect alone prevented the other dimensions from unrolling?

Again, the abstruse reaches of mathematical string theory provide no answer. Also, those weird waves could make life impossible by confusing the physical world. Then even simple biological processes could not proceed. Planetary orbits would be unstable if the extra dimensions were large. Perhaps the basic forces would be altered as well, making chemistry very difficult.

Why did Creation stop at only big three spatial dimensions, then? We don't know. Maybe an "anthropic" argument is the closest we will ever get to an explanation. This view holds that many kinds of universes could be created, but the one we live in had very special properties — because otherwise, we wouldn't exist to ask such questions.

Perhaps 3D is optimum. For smart life like us, 3D is favored over 2D because there are so few connections and geometric tricks available in 2D. Try to imagine living in Flatland. Seen from our 3D world, the 2D beings must still have basic body functions. Eating means taking something from outside and

processing it inside. But to have an alimentary canal means dividing in two! — the paired sides of a 2D animal.

Higher dimensions than ours might provide even more physiological tricks. Maybe other higher dimensional universes exist, beyond our seeing — but they could be boring, because it would be hard to arrange biological processes with so many degrees of freedom. Life there may be no better than 6D slime molds.

Not all the items theorists exclude from the Menu of Universes are dull. You might innocently ask why the extra dimensions must be spatial at all. Why not an extra *time* dimension?

We know the idea of repeating a pattern in space, returning to the same spot. (Most dances are like that — repetitions we enjoy.) The bug walking around the outer rim of the garden hose can circumnavigate its world and come home again.

But what would moving through an extra dimension in time feel like? The bug would return to a prior moment — time travel.

Again, we would not notice our arm sweeping through tiny slices of past time. But *events* could cycle in time, changing the way atoms or

particles work together. How could this be coherent? The imagination flags.

This weird notion so violates our intuition that few string theorists have taken it up. There seems no fundamental reason why it should be excluded, but it's, well, disturbing. Even theory has its limits — as do theorists.

Can such small dimensions matter? They do lead to beautiful equations, but can the larger picture lead to major changes in the way we think?

Gravity is key. It has always stood apart from the other forces (electrical and nuclear). Compared with them, gravity is very weak. It reigns supreme in the cosmos, making galaxies whirl and structure form, only because the other forces have such a short range. Gravity rules over large distances.

In string theory, gravity is similarly isolated. It may be the only force that senses these other dimensions. Current theory supposes this is so. On such small scales gravity lives in many dimensions, and this makes it brutishly strong on tiny scales.

We've never noticed any deviation from the familiar gravitational law in the motions of planets, of

course. But on tiny scales the theory is unchecked. It is very difficult to measure the weak gravitational attraction between iron balls at separations smaller than a tenth of a millimeter.

We can think of the extra dimensions as added space to stuff the gravitational force into. Gravity may only *seem* weak to us 3Ders because we don't know about the extra dimensions. Gravity may be leaking into all those extra tiny dimensions, dissipating its force so that it looks weaker than big, robust electricity.

Picture gravity as spreading over an expanding area, the way light dims far from a street lamp. Get closer and the attractive force rises rapidly. Now add extra dimensions. The closer two small, gravitating masses are, the steeper their gravitational attraction gets, because it has extra room to spread. This means stronger attraction at tiny distances, so that gravity can draw the masses tighter together. Near enough, and gravity wins over any repulsive force (say, if the particles had the same charge).

Presto, the amplified gravity will slam the particles together. At a high enough mass density, you find that ordinary two-particle collisions can form a black hole.

Such practical ideas are fine, and may increase funding — but the wonder of living in a many-dimensional world is more fun.

Some recent theories believe there may be *very large* extra dimensions, not rolled up at all. These would be spaces above and beyond our own.

Edwin Abbott taught us to think about a 2D being suddenly moving through our 3D world. That Flatlander would see only slices of our reality — cross-sections of trees and rocks and moving cars. How could it stitch this into a coherent view?

If it did, it could make a 2D symbol or picture and we would understand it as a flat scene. But for the 2D creature what we took as an image would be the whole object, not just a photograph. A photograph to us would be a world to the 2D citizen.

Similarly, we the dimensionally destitute, trapped in our narrow 3D, could not see dimensions above. So big extra dimensions may lie beyond our senses.

To process light we use a basically 2D retina fitted at the back of a spherical eyeball. Then we reconstitute in our brains our 3D world picture. We're so good at this stunt, we never think about it.

But consider an analogy. A 4D

creature must have a 3D eye, then. A retinal *sphere*, not a mere plane, could provide the same service to image the 4D world.

In this way, maybe we can *intuit* 4D, even if we can't see it. Consider 2D. A Flatlander would see a human finger as a 2D blob that changed size and shape as the finger thrust down through its world, punching through the 2D sheet on which it lived.

How about us, here with our blinkered perspective? If a 4D creature moved through, we would see 3D blobs appearing mysteriously, moving past in confusing ways. We could not comprehend how they fitted together into something that extended away, in an unseen direction.

If the 4Ders spoke, we would hear a strange symphony of booms and clatters and screeches coming from the air all around, and even from *inside* us. These would be sounds as they are in 4D, where the waves spread out in a different way, in complex packets and eddies.

Some distinctions in 3D-space mean nothing when viewed in 4D. Distinctions we take as basic may evaporate in the larger perspective.

To see why, consider 2D first — say, the sense of left and right. Picture a hand drawn on transparent glass. The 2Der lives on that plane

and can't escape it. We can. Viewed from one side of the glass, the hand looks right-handed. Now we flip the glass. From the other side, it looks left-handed.

Handedness is a 2D distinction. Being able to look at a 2D difference fully makes it trivial to the 3D person viewing it.

A 4D entity looking at 3D objects also has a wider understanding. It sees all aspects of our 3D world, simultaneously, with nothing blocked by angle of view. What would that be like?

Consider when we look at a 2D painting. We see everything in it from one viewpoint. Suppose you go to an art exhibit to see a sculpture of a woman. There are ten copies of it, each one rotated a bit, standing against a wall. You stand in one place and can look at the entire woman without moving.

This has been tried. People who see such a sculpture often do not recognize the ten different angles as showing the same object.

Maybe this is something like being a 4D creature, which can then see everything in a 3D scene, without moving the viewpoint.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of all these new theoretical models is what they *don't* explain.

If there are large extra dimensions, why don't we see any signs? Blobs appearing from nowhere, for example, as 4D objects intrude.

Go back to the 2D analogy. We don't intervene in any 2D worlds, because we haven't found any. Geometrically, this may mean that we are isolated on a membrane ("brane theory") and can't reach down to a 2D world. We're tightly bound to our brane by forces at the particle level. Our effects can't reach the lesser world of 2D.

Similarly, 4D spaces may not be able to reach into ours. When we know more about the forces keeping us in our 3D universe, maybe we'll discover a way to venture into both 2D and 4D universes.

Or maybe we don't recognize the signs of intrusion? In our 3D world, two 2D planes can intersect, meeting along a line — like the two opposite pages of a book. Similarly, two 3D spaces can intersect, meeting only in a plane.

Clear evidence that somebody is tinkering from 4D would be the sudden appearance of a plane slanting across our space, extending to infinity, mottled with passing images. When you approach the plane you can feel the objects in it. Though you flatten yourself against the plane, you cannot fully enter the

other realm, because you can only insert a slice of yourself at a time.

Nobody sees such things in everyday life, of course. But maybe we're not making allowances for how utterly different a 4D world might be. Objects that appear only on a plane would be mysterious images without solid manifestations. We would see them moving, but not find any hard evidence.

This sounds oddly like the many UFO sightings that never yield solid proof. (Or like ghosts, too.) What if, for reasons we do not fathom, 4D beings appear only in our skies, not on the ground? Then they might seem to be cruising forms, ships, glowing lights — then gone, vanished into other 4D realms we do not know.

This is just a speculation, but it shows how little we truly know about the possibilities of 4D, or more-D. As theories mount, we should remember that a mind-wrenching notion like higher dimensions will have ramifications far beyond the conventional.

They may be hard to recognize. The most valuable tool in the scientist's kit is the ability to be surprised.

But it takes data to do that. So the experiments to see sprays of

mini-black holes in our upper atmosphere may give us the first clue to the lurking extra dimensions. Not as shocking as a sudden apparition from 4D, maybe, but solid.

Suppose the detectors now being assembled do find jets of energetic particles zooming along horizontal paths in our atmosphere — the signature of black hole evaporation. We could use these to study black holes, learning far more than we ever could by looking for distant holes in the galaxy.

Beyond opening a whole new window on the laws of our universe, what use could we make of the spray of particles that signify black holes?

Could we enhance the mass of the tiny holes until they could survive? To do that, they would have to ingest a lot more matter and build up their masses. It looks impossible, even if the particle shower occurs right next to a sheet of lead.

If this proves so, too bad — because tiny holes could be both disposal sites and energy sources. So far, all speculations about how to utilize black holes have focused on holes with the mass of stars, but the basic processes work on any scale.

Throw garbage down a hole and it is gone forever. But in the last

instant before vanishing down gravity's gullet, the heated mass radiates back out to us high energy jets of virulent light. Roger Penrose noticed this possibility in his early papers on black hole geometry. Harnessing this effect might be possible, making a genuinely pollution-swallowing energy source.

So it's conceivable that as arcane an idea as extra dimensions could have engineering implications. The day may come when civil engineers will need to know not

mere differential and integral calculus, but hypergeometric surfaces, 4D projection, and other rarefied arts.

Knowing this material could do worlds of good (literally). But as a professor who teaches mechanics to engineers now, that's one course I hope I won't have to teach.

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

LONGTIME READERS know that we try to save up the best material of the year for our annual October anniversary issue—this was our practice even before we began publishing the double issue in 1991. This year we found it impossible to fit all the best stories into 240 pages, so look for more high-calibre fiction in the months ahead.

Our cover story in December is an imaginative science fiction novella about an unimaginative man, compliments of a writer whose name has been absent from our pages for far too long: Ray Aldridge. In "Soul Pipes," we'll explore a planet with some secrets that aren't buried deep enough...

Also lined up for next month is Ron Goulart's latest opus, "The Woman in the Mist." Mr. Goulart turns back the clock one hundred years to give us an atmospheric adventure for Professor Harry Challenge.

Other goodies on tap soon include Jack O'Connell's tale of two thieves, "The Swag from Doc Hawthorne's," Jerry Olton's "The Unfamiliar," a late-1950s CIA adventure by Laird Barron, Alex Irvine's vision of the Wild West, another reimagined Greek myth from M. Rickert, and stories from new writers like Al Michaud, David D. Levine, and Jeremy Minton. Subscribe now before the rates go up and make sure you won't miss any of the reading pleasure.

The prolific Ms. Lee writes from her home in England to say that she is currently at work on a variety of projects, including A Bed of Earth, the third book in The Venus Quartet; Metallic Love, a sequel to the classic Silver Metal Lover; and a young adult novel entitled Piratica.

Her new story for us merges traditional elements of both science fiction and fantasy into a rich and evocative blend.

In the City of Dead Night

By Tanith Lee

WE ENTERED THE CITY IN the hour after the first sunset. It was twilight. Thick bluish dusk, like smoke, rose from the ground. Out of

this, the cliffs of buildings towered to touch the luminous sky, that was, and would stay, too bright for any but the fiercest stars to show.

Night could never come here. Here, night was done with.

"Don't be so awed by this," said Hassent.

I looked at him "No?"

"No. It's an old city, partly destroyed by aerial action, partly ruinous. And after sunfall it lies between two suns, the second and smaller of which will rise in three hours. That's all. The facts."

"Really."

He smiled. Oddly, in the half-dark, his own darkness was paler.

"Well, what would you say then, Aira?"

"There weren't always two suns."

"True. And?"

"Once there used to be night."

"But now there isn't, only twilight. Just perfect for scum like us to burgle in."

Why did we have this discussion? To pass the time, probably, while we rested on the terrace-wall after the appalling climb up from the valley below. We had used ropes, of course, and each of us was agile as a monkey, but it still took a long while and was peril-fraught enough to satisfy even Hassent's irritating taste for dangerous, arduous exercise.

From the terrace, we could look down straight through into the City. A vista was carved for miles by a wide boulevard like the bed of a precisely ruled river. The strange smooth buildings, rising either side, with their pointed windows that had the shape of fingers, ended frequently in shattered tops, where the bombardment had hit them all those years ago. And obviously, there was nobody anymore to light a lamp. From the valley, if one was unaware, the City could pass for another feature of the surrounding mountains. It had done so often, our Source had assured us. You had to know, and have a map. And then there was the climb. But Hassent and I were used to climbs. Up the sheer towers of ancient palaces, along the sloping insides of charming sewage systems.... We were thieves. The climbing, like the robbery, was part of our job.

But the second sun filled me with concern. It lay now, just under the horizon, throwing upward a preview of light the way the first sun, the real sun, does at dawn. The second sun was *not* real. It had been made and raised and set to circle the City by magic. They — the ones who once lived here — had called it the Great Lantern. Now these magicians were gone, bombed out of residence by some of their numerous enemies from across the mountain range. But the second sun, the Great Lantern, that remained, and went on rising (in the *north*), so here, there could never be night. And — what *else* remained?

I had said something like this to him, back in the desert, when we were at the last halt, and sold off the riding-urts. We had a night (yes, because there *was* night, out there) on the town, he with a pretty female pay-me, and I with a handsome male pay-me. We had also drunk the wine-wells dry. And in the intimacy post-received pleasure and alcohol, I had let slip to Hassent my doubt about the magics of this place — whether they were truly finished. But Hassent had only said, "All gone. All that's left in the City is treasure beyond the dreams of insanity. That's why we're

going. And it's a bit late to coward out. We've spent all our money."

Now, on the terrace, he said, businesslike, "Let's make a move, shall we?"

So we hitched the ropes again and swung off over the inside drop, to where a flight of broken steps hung in the dusk.

To descend was to go down into the gathered dark. The other way, the glowing green-blue sky watched us indifferently. I looked it in the eye, coiled up my rope, and followed Hassent down the stair.

WHEN I WAS a child in Sheemelay, the masters who taught me theft had also taught me quite a lot of superstition. Tie always the left boot up *after* the right boot; lick your finger and touch the stone of your marked building, to placate it with a bit of yourself. (Blood was better, but then you had to be careful.) Over the years, especially once I partnered up with Hassent, I had stopped, or tried to stop, some of this. Hassent had absolutely no time for it. He is a pragmatist. "You take," he was fond of saying, "till it takes you." But old habits die hard.

The lower levels of the City, as we got down into them, seemed buried, as if in a cellar. The effect was heightened by all the upper streets which rose above, and sometimes forded the lower in the form of bridges. Several of those had been smashed by bombs. The surviving masonry stuck out, and in the unending dusk seemed to have weird shapes, like the staring heads of huge beasts with open jaws —

I said nothing about this fancy to Hassent. Five years of his company had enabled me to imagine what he would say back.

There were gardens in the City. Some must have been there to begin with, parks with curious tapering pines and thin stone statues. But the gardens had overgrown themselves and spread, and elsewhere groves of weeds, bushes, and trees had sometimes seeded in the walls and avenues. Even so, the City, beyond certain areas of rubble, drifts of dust, old leaves, the ground-down shale of fallen marble, was *tidy*, spacious, and uncluttered.

After a while, we paused again under an archway, to consult the map.

Beyond lay a vast plaza. It was closely and immaculately paved except in one spot far across, where bomb damage had caused two or three

buildings to collapse. A fountain stood at the square's center, pristine. As we lurked, peering over the map by the light of Hassent's glow-worm torch, a snake hissed loudly from the square and a prickle of new stars shot off from the fountain into the air.

"It's fine, Aira. Calm down."

"But — "

"Some of their gadgets still work here. We know that, we've been *told* that."

"I thought it was an exaggeration."

"Their second sun still works so why not a mere fountain?"

"Yes, I see." Did I? I watched the water-jet playing up its spangles at the sky. Was there enough green light even so for it to glitter quite so eloquently?

"Now," said Hassent, "let's get our bearings. We came in over South Wall. Sun Two will rise up there, in the mountains, when it does. That's north, then. And this plaza, I believe, is *this* one on the map, with the building they call the Oratorium — look, you see? — that skinny tower with its hat off — so now we go *that* way."

It was tepid, but not cold. Yet sometimes little breezes blew, and they varied, some much colder than the cool, some much warmer than tepid. Different atmospheres still existed here.

We walked out finally through the plaza's center, to avoid the fallen buildings. I gazed once more at the fountain. The jet emerged from the mouth of a figure cast from some glassy, half-transparent material. It was not human, nor quite anything else. I could not make out what it was, really, although somehow it *was* disturbing. But Hassent was already about a hundred strides away, so I left the fountain and went on. At the square's furthest edge, I glanced back. And the water had sunk again, vanished. We must have trodden on some hidden lever under the paving that started it off, perhaps on another one this side to shut it down again.

If there were hidden levers for that, there might be some for less amusing things. I caught him up and told him my idea. He smiled. He said, "It's all right, Aira. I remembered to tie my *left boot last*."

Probably we walked for an hour more. I can judge time as a rule, even on this journey to the City after I lost my timepiece playing Blackcard in

Kulbin. But I do it by the sun, or the moon, I suppose, or the infinitesimal slinking of the stars — and here that would not be possible.

To reach the place we were aiming for, we had to trek ever deeper down, down into those buried cellars of the lowest streets. Even if night had been extinguished here, the way still got steadily darker.

I noticed he failed to light anything stronger than the torch.

We stopped at last, and had a swig of water laced with ginger-root spirit.

"There it is," he said.

" — ," I answered, cautiously.

The building was low and long, and long again — there seemed to be acres of it. The Thesaurry of the City. The bombs had never reached it, even all the way down here, where, *if* they fell, as we had already seen, they had always caused maximum destruction. I thought of the war-balloons gliding over, the deadly copper wires strung out, and the impacted electric charges descending — lovely as fireworks — each an induced lightning-strike. Once, I had had the dubious delight, in the course of my job as a thief, of pretending to be a server at an orgy arranged for some military general. I recall his holding forth on the efficiency of these bombs, invented a century before by the alchientist Xos. They have been used in many spots, always to enormous effect. Now, outside the treasure house of the City, I considered the City's own general survival. All told, it had withstood the onslaught unusually well. And yet — it was empty. None of the stories explained that. Of course, perhaps the living citizens had simply fled or been captured. I wondered too, why the clever aerialist bombardiers had not put out the second sun, while they were at it. Conceivably those electric bombs just could not fly *upward*?

"Are you ready?" Hassent inquired.

I jumped. "...not quite."

"Come on, Aira. Stop looking like a curd-sick yurt. You're not usually as bad as this."

Normally I would have snapped back with something. I did not.

This low, the faintest glimmer of dusk was still floating like clouds between the pillars and the finger-shaped door-mouths of the building we had come here to enter. I saw ghosts. It was a trick of the eyes. But even so. They fluttered, in and out, up and down. Poor things, were they

thinking they were still alive, and wondering why the City was unlit and full of holes? Had they forgotten?

According to the Source (that man Hassent and I had eventually, after months of scheming and bribes, got to meet in Kulbin), this treasury was the one which held the greatest amount of treasure. There were zi-rubies the size of a two-year-old child, electris in bundled rods seven feet in length, emerald and qualium, and Plum-Breath, the fireless smoke-conducting purple jade. Elsewhere in the City lay other caches, but nothing like this one. Nothing but this one was worth bothering with, if you had actually managed to reach the City, scale the walls, get in. Why then, I had murmured all those miles and days ago, had no one else, the Source himself for example, ever gone there? He replied that quite a few had gone there, and returned richer than a thousand kings. But they could only carry so much down the mountains and the walls. And as there was such a lot, still plenty of it was left. As for himself, he thanked me for my compliment, but he was too old for such a jaunt. We had cut him in, of course. We left the usual pledge — a vital piece each of our entry-exit ribbons, issued by the Royal Kronarchery. The Source seemed frantically keen that we succeed. His map was of the best.

"Hassent — did anyone say there was — *anything* — here?"

"Not apart from mounds of treasure. You heard it all the same as I did."

"But the Great Lantern is still operating. And that fountain — "

"Oh for the love of life, Aira! Forget the bloody fountain. Let's get on."

Just then, something cried in the City.

It sounded a long way off, and yet, partly due to the amphitheater effect of this lower depth, it was *all-present*, everywhere around us. The cry was soulless, savage, yet desolate beyond description. We both stood, paralyzed in the ringing pulse of it. And then it was over, and only memory replayed it on and on inside the ear.

"There are no animals here," I said. I spoke incredibly softly — not quite a whisper. "Everyone says, no animals, no birds, come into the City. Not even mountain wolves or lilyx. Not even eagles set down on the highest roofs — or even fly over — "

"I saw crows flying about, when we were coming up from the valley — something at least, down inside the wall, flying over, black — or maybe

not. But anyway, you've said it. This thing is *outside* the City. Up in the mountains. Crags echo. We just heard it." Hassent also was speaking very, very low. If his darkness had paled, in the dim-out I would never see.

"*Outside?* You're joking. It's *inside*. With us. What was it?"

I was not asking Hassent. But anyway he said, "Some mechanism, could be. It didn't sound animal really, did it, let alone human. Machinery, like the foun —"

Whatever it was, it chose that moment to cry again.

Hassent's words and voice were obliterated. *Thought* was obliterated. Only *feeling* responded to the fearful sound.

It was unbearable. Heartless — yet it was filled by a terrible agony — wounded and agonized yet it was raw with malevolence beyond expression. I mean, *my* expression. The thing which cried expressed it only too well.

In the second aftermath, he and I stood like a couple more statues. Then Hassent shook himself.

"Listen, Aira. Whatever it is, and it might just be *nothing*, it's miles off. Trust me, I'm good at judging sounds, you know that. So our very best course —"

Before he had finished I had taken the hint. And we were running, both of us, light and terrifically fast, toward the shelter of the treasure-house.

Here is a confession.

When things get serious, I always find myself glimpsing back, with bittersweet nostalgia, to my childhood — which was only ten years ago, mostly, if I count adulthood from when I was fifteen. In those minutes as we ran inside the dusk within that City canyon, and threw ourselves headlong up the pillars, and next at the low balcony rail of a tall window — there flashed through my mind quick images of my days in the Thiefs' School of Sheemelay. I saw the teachers, the fellow pupils — even the thick green quarrel trees in the courtyards. Although, as with all such institutions, the school was reckoned to be a secret, everyone knew. The town was proud of it. They also took a cut from the proceeds of the more profitable First Steals. A trained thief anyway never robs on his own turf — so the better school a town has, the safer its townizens.

But, from thinking like this, I knew how afraid I was now. The last occasion I became so nostalgic was the day in Yot, when I was nearly hanged....

The window behind the railing had a kind of glass in it. It was the type of glass that is melded all through to metal, opaque and shining like tarnished platinum. We could see nothing the other side of it either, in the non-light. But Hassent produced his glass-biter, and scored in swiftly, so a pane dropped away. We crushed through after, into the dark behind the dark.

All this while, there had been no other noise from the City. By which I mean, no other cry.

Once inside the Thesaurry, Hassent and I froze again. We stood there, listening to the hoofbeats of our hearts, hoping that was all we would have to hear. It was.

Nothing in the world now made a sound.

Maybe three minutes passed. Then he spoke.

"It's as black as night in here even if there isn't any night. I'm going to chance the sparkle."

"Hassent — that's going to be bright. What if — "

"What if what?"

"If something out there sees."

Hassent said, sensibly, "Fine. But how else do we find our way anywhere?"

"Use the glow-worms."

"Not in here. Here's too big. And you know there might be guardians — and catches."

This was definite. Even if there were nothing supernatural, there would surely be the sorts of pits and snares all cities, if possessed of fabulous wealth, tend to leave lying about, the way the ordinary householder leaves mousetraps.

"The sparkle," I said, "might activate just that."

"A light-reactive catch?"

"They were magicians, remember."

"Yes, but most of that has decayed. I mean, if it hadn't, we'd have been stumbling over it everywhere already." And then, having consulted me and ignored my opinion, Hassent switched on his sparkle. It sat up on his

left shoulder like a tiny obedient moon, casting out its bluish clarity. "Going to chance yours, then?" he queried.

I thought that was unnecessary, for all about us a wide hall had become visible end to end in the single sparkle's rays.

"This is one of the outer Arrival Rooms," I said. "I remember from what we were told."

"Where they took the tribute in," he agreed, "and the tax from traders. And all those clerks sat at all those benches over there along the wall, weighing the gems and bars, counting the cash."

We looked at the benches, which were of marble. There were also marble stands and flat upright desks, and curious balances of stone weights.

"The carving is complicated," I said.

It monopolized every surface. Curls and tendrils (leaves? hair?), out of which squinted disturbing faces again, that were not quite human, not quite anything else, like the figure in the fountain. They had, the faces, no necks, but little paw-like hands. The sparkle winked slowly over their marble eyes, polished by age and the rubbing quality of pure vacance.

There was an uneasy melancholy about the carved faces, but this did not dispel the sense I had of something more ominous. Like the cry we had heard, I thought, misery coupled here with some dreadful other thing, a sort of evil so unlike anything that mankind knows or makes — as to be utterly beyond hope.

"I don't like this room, Hassent."

"Retie your boots," he said. "Lick your finger and rub it on the wall," he mocked. "Pee in the corner. Say a *Pleasetosaveme* nine times — " Hassent juggled his eyebrows. "You're right," he said. "It stinks of something foul in here. Like a dead rat the size of a kronarch's palace. Only, it isn't a smell."

"No."

He reached out and took my hand, squeezed it, let go.

"What do you want to do, Aira? Go back?"

I considered. I am contrasuggestive, evidently, because now he had come round to my own view so suddenly, I began to decide we were being crazy. Greed, no doubt.

"We've got this far," I said. "Let's —"

And then, oh then, out there *It* cried out again.

Hassent too made a small noise. The Arrival Room went black as he slammed off the sparkle like a blow.

When the awful, *awful* threnody had finally died — from the air, from our inner ears — I heard us start to breathe again.

"That was," he said, "nearer. Wasn't it?"

"I think so."

"What the Bear's Best Bits is it?"

"Something...very big.

"And lonesome."

"And malign —"

"— beyond our worst-ever nightmares. Why," he added, with virtuous indignation, "did no one tell us about *this*?"

"Do you think it saw your light?"

"Don't ask *me*," he said.

"Well I'm not about to call out and ask *it*."

We poised, in soundlessness. The Cry now was not repeated. I said, at last, "What time is it, Hass?"

He cupped his hand, shielding his time-piece dial, and read the lighted sign. "Thirty-first hour plus nine. Only half an hour till the second sun comes up."

We thought about this, both of us. The Great Lantern, which some had claimed to have read about, circled round the City, going back to sink again in the mountains where it rose, a brief space before real dawn. It gave a vivid illumination very like the Earth's Sun. Or so it was said. Would it then give enough light therefore to frighten anything off — or alternatively, give anything enough light — to hunt by?

"Downstairs," said Hassent presently, "inside this building's core, the treasure — there may be catches, but it's a vault. Do you see?"

Vaults might be closed off, be defensible. I nodded in the dark as if he could see me. "Yes."

There were about seventeen flights of stairs, some short and some of fifty steps — or so I judged; I was hardly counting very exactly. We employed both glow-worms, and even when the stairs became wet and

slippery from something — rain, or a watercourse that had broken through somewhere — we did not put on the sparkles. Despite being enough underground by then, it might be safe, and despite our not having heard anything — *unusual* for ages.

Below the seventeenth (if it was) staircase, there lay stretched a bizarre and awesome thing. It was a guardian, sure enough. Mages, and royalty occasionally, have access to such creatures. Perhaps not stupidly, I had anticipated several of them scattered about the City. But this one was still as the stone, and even when we came right up to it, it never raised its head, or blinked an eye.

"It's dead," said Hassent.

"More than that. It's fossilized. Ancient."

We spent a while walking around it, touching it, marveling. It was very big, the size of an elephant, or mammoth. From the large head, the curved tusks extended, black as jet, but the great eyes were shut by crenelated lids. Apparently it had died peacefully, maybe of old age and in its sleep. It was not this which had made those sounds.

Beyond the guardian was a closed door of iron, patterned all over by what looked like magical inscriptions.

"*This is it.*"

Our Source had been precise about this door, the one recognizable entry to the treasure chamber. So we stood and chanted in unison the formula we had learnt by heart, and repeated over and over for a year, for practice. And then Hass struck the door seven ringing clouts against the to-us-unsecret secret lock.

For a moment, nothing. I thought, *Everyone's deranged. This won't work* —

And then, like the strangest animated cluster of vines, the door began to unfurl and untwine from itself, until all the unroped skeins of patterned iron had drawn away into the walls either side.

We moved into the treasure chamber, Hassent and I.

"Oh, Aira — " he exclaimed, "just *look* — "

Never in my life had I ever seen anything like it. And I had seen inside quite a few treasure-stores in the past.

The granite-clad hall rose up and up, about five stories of it, tunneled right through the middle of the Thesauri Building, windowless, yet lit by

the dulllest yellow lights that were blearing into awakeness on every ledge, roused presumably by someone's coming in.

By this vague illumination, still we saw the substance of the tales.

Zi-rubies, mostly of absurd enormity, stacked up from floor to distant ceiling, like columns of fiery blood, emeralds green as the sea that lay packed tight as figs in clear glass boxes, pink sapphires heaped more carelessly in low pens, over which they had sometimes coyly spilled.... Electriss was ranked along, row on row, in bundles, like spears, as we had been told. Next to the pale gleam of it burned the matured glow of gold, in bricks, rings, rods, and hot-white jidel silver, one good piece of which sells for a year's luxury, in cups and shields, body mail and beast-armor, or formed into books, where every page was of thin leaf-silver set with thick lines of golden qualium. Qualium was there in balls too, and milky galvanic schist in globes, which were only less in girth than the breathtaking globes of the rose-white pearls.... Against the walls, marshaled behind the rest, were banks of jade, green and purple, and man-high sheets of aromaticor, with useful perforations so strips could be torn off — And there were other things one barely glanced at, faced with such riches — showers of polished diamonds, crusts of scintillant coppery tope —

We forgot everything, even ourselves. It was almost a religious experience, standing there in the Thesaurry, gazing at all this unbelievable but *actual* and proximitous wealth, and thinking of the splendid cities of Yot and Belu and Charinth, in which we might, now, be going to reside like kings —

But then. The thought came too, riding in over the others, and *because* of them, the thought which asked, Why have so few benefited from this place?

For there are thieves everywhere, and mostly they are trained professionals. And even though the maps are scarce, several are reckoned to exist and look, *we* had one. And provided you had too the two or three necessary charms, and some stamina, and a head for heights — crags or stairs — what was the problem?

As often happens in the end, Hassent and I were having this thought together. Though we are as unlike in most ways as chosh and cheese, we know each other's minds, since, at root, they are about the same.

"Well," he said.

"Yes," I said.

And then a *voice* said something, clear and mild, out of the walls. We jumped like grasshoppers.

Even though all it said was a statement of the obvious: **You stand in the Thesauru of the City.**

After that there was a pause, presumably for us to collect ourselves. And then: **We are gone. Therefore you are welcome to our wealth. If you have come so far, take what you wish and are able. We grudge you nothing, for we have now no use for it.**

This is where our similarity of minds, Hassent's and mine, diverges. He began to relax, he began to look glad and approving of this ancient wisdom which had generously made him its heir.

I, however, braced myself tensely for the rest.

Which presently came.

Know also that your acquisition is to be brief. Nor lucky.

Hassent, already scrabbling at one of the shorter hills of rubies, slid noisily back to the floor.

"Ssh!"

But even over the rush, rattle, thump and plink of disturbed gems and Hassent landing on the marble, I heard every word. And so did he.

I had been wondering, as I said, about them, where they had gone, and why. I even pondered why exactly the City had been attacked, and by whom? Magicians collect animosity, of course. That was what everybody who spoke of it had apparently concluded. Jealous or afraid, the enemies had come over the mountains in their war-balloons, and meted out electric bombardment.

The voice in the Thesauru was mechanical. I have heard such voices in other spots, in theaters, or religious auditoriums. Our entry or activity seemed to have triggered it, just like the magically automatic lamps.

Now the voice explained, in its calm and genderless tones, how the City of magicians had in fact bombed *itself*. They had been attempting, it transpired, to wipe out a dread menace which had grown in their midst. But the menace, as they had feared, proved elusive and invulnerable, and eventually only much fruitless destruction was achieved.

After that, seeing resistance was not to be made to their adversary, the mages, regardless of their powers, surrendered to fate. They put away their

armament and their sorcery, and waited without remonstrance, until the menacing horror they had been unable to destroy killed each and every one of them.

Ask then where we are gone? It is there we have gone, announced the voice, Into the maw of it. The fault was ours, for we ourselves created it, although in ignorance, unmeaning to, and supposing what we created was its very opposite. Regard the ruin of this city with compassion, for you also, since you have ventured here, must now become the prey of that which murdered us. Be advised, this thing is inescapable. Waste no futile struggle upon evasion. Submit with grace. Soon you will join us in eternal silence. Thus farewell — and *greetings*.

We stood strainingly alert for some further while, but the voice rendered nothing more.

“IT’S ALWAYS like this in these historic dumps,” said Hass. “Bloody old dog-in-the-trough curses everywhere, *We* can’t have it anymore, so neither can you. Touch the cash and it’s unavoidable doom.”

“That isn’t what it said,” I protested.

“All right, it smugly told us: Take everything, but we conjured up an inescapable demon anyway by accident, and it’ll get you, so cheers!”

We had recovered enough to choose some of the glorious stuff that was additionally portable, and pile it up in two neat heaps near the open door. But our hearts were not in it, really.

We both kept looking *toward* the open door, as well. And out over the hump of the fossilized guardian they had been so powerful they had not bothered to replace, along the last stairway, into the dark. Where lay that which the powerful ones had been forced to submit to.

Neither of us had discussed the notion that the thing which made those noises was the very self same.

But besides, nothing stirred. And we had heard no further sound, no other — *cries*.

“I can’t *concentrate*,” Hassent growled suddenly, kicking into a miniature stack of faultless emeralds, so they spun in all directions. “All *this* — and I can’t *appreciate* it.”

“No. It’s the pits.”

We sat down by the loot we had accumulated. "We have enough here," I said, "anyway, probably, to ensure we can live individually to three hundred, in relative comfort."

"That's not the *point*."

"No, Hass."

"This is like — like a wonderful gallery of artifacts and *art* — it should be savored. It should be *searched*, carefully, for days, for the most perfect and unique items —"

"Well, we could," I suggested doubtfully.

"It's been *spoiled*," he petulantly grieved.

Later he said, "It's the thirty-third hour. The second sun's up by now, though not high yet. I have a theory about their Great Lantern, Aira. I think they put it up to counteract this *thing*, this monster menace they so sloppily *inadvertently* created. It must be at its best in the night. Only the extra sun didn't work either," he gloomily finished.

No wonder nothing came in here — no animals, no birds — not even a nocturnal lizard, bat, or moth.

"I've got a theory too, Hass. I think the only people who turn up here — adventurers, thieves, whatever — get sent here by the ones who've got too much sense to try it themselves. Like our beloved Source, who gave us the charms and such a choice map. He wasn't *that* old, he could have done it. I believe we've been used like experimental beasts. We've been sent in to see what happens to us — if the City is safe yet for a general stealing spree."

"And when we don't come back," appended Hass grimly, "they'll know it still isn't."

Again later, I said, "I wonder if just waiting it out down here until full sunrise might work. Perhaps it — goes to its lair —"

"No," he said, "*think*. Those magicians — they all died. Hiding didn't work. Although — well, have you even seen any skeletons — any remains? Only that guardian over there, and that's been deceased for centuries from the look. As for people of our sort, have we met anyone *ever* who claimed to have been here? Even if nobody would boast, word gets round. No, no one ever got back, Aira. And neither will we."

Because I am contrasuggestive, as I said before, or over-optimistic — or, more likely, too scared to be *pessimistic*, I began quietly to try to reason

us out of this mood. I produced many clichés, perhaps even one stating the magicians had been spineless to give in.

And then something extraordinary happened and shocked us both to our feet.

A flaring orange light began to slant straight in at us from nowhere, yet somehow above, igniting as it did so the guts of the treasure chamber and a million jewelry eyes.

Inexplicable — then it was obvious. The roof of this chamber, which had seemed to be stone, was another example of that somber metal-glass. And over it the Great Lantern now took its way. Second dawn poured in.

If things had been different, I might have been impressed by this underground view of the magic sun. It looked, through the glazing, precisely like a sun, rather smaller, though hardly less brilliant than the real one. I had heard the magicians produced it out of some alchientistic combustible previously unknown, firing it from a vast gun, which also struck it alight like flint-and-tinder, straight into the sky. Even at its apex, it hung lower than the true sun, of course, or the moon, inside the atmosphere of the world — but seen like this from the Thesaurry, you would never guess.

As we gaped at it, Terror, which perhaps we had both mislaid again a second, burst shrieking from the City above and dropped down on us.

I thought it was a cloud — something passing between us and the blinding amber of the second sun. Something falling...weightless, *harmless* — But once through, that cry came with it, from silence, booming, like a wind of steel needles —

We two tumbled, rolled, crashed against arcades of rubies that only rocked, throwing off a few bloody drops.

Terror landed, still screaming, there in the Thesaurry. It had come, not from the stair, but *right through the metal-glass roof*. For it could come right through *anything*.

There was no time to demand idiotically What is it? Though the mechanical voice had been ambiguous and everyone else had lied. There was also no room for speech in the noise-punctured air.

I had rolled all the way back against a sheet of the priceless purple jade beloved of tyrants. The jade obligingly tipped down all round me, cracking, then breaking in shards on the floor — but that was nothing.

The creature crouched now in the middle of the vault, not needing to position itself, passing *through* and *over* everything that was there. It was shadow-black — everything that it covered passed within it, and disappeared — and formless. It was like those things they say are in the ocean deeps, and swim without limbs and see without eyes. This was all that, nor did it have any mouth to make its crying, nor any maw to take us in and keep us, as it did *not* keep the other things it swarmed upon and through and over. And it was Fear Incarnate. My bones had turned to jelly and my blood to talc. Though I am strong, then I had no strength. I lay among the broken fire-conducting jade, and became an abject victim, as the mages had done. Just as Hassent was doing. As anyone would.

The core of it was fathomless yet void. I stared. That was where we would be going. Like them. Into that blackness that was a Nothingness, into that silence aeons beyond its own aching scream. All-blackness it was, black night without moon or stars — yet it was unrepelled by the light of the second sun, which boiled around it. Indeed it seemed to have been the second sunrise which had brought it —

Bewildered, I saw Hassent abruptly roll again, and leap back to his feet. He was running to where the huge rods of electris stood in ranks, and the balls of qualium and schist. Sprawled there, I watched, and observed him heft one of the enormous spear-like bolts. I thought, *Panic has sent him off his head* — he was going to attempt to lance the creature of darkness — which somehow could swallow nothing save one thing — *anything which lived* — but a spear would pass through it, useless, for it was made only of black, only of nothing, only of utter night —

As the first electris rod smote against the metal-glass ceiling five stories up, I too was on my feet. I seized the nearest object, a lesser zi-ruby dislodged and still of substantial size, and flung it too. From that, and Hass's rain of spears, the metal-glass had begun to fracture. Spiderwebbing flashed over the scald of the sun.

We kept at this, slinging, casting anything we could manage.

During the activity, neither of us looked — over *there*, where death was moving without haste, savoring or only sluggish after the hunger of such a long wait for food like us.

Not looking, throwing missiles, yet I began to lose hope. This seemed the proper moment to do so. And then, the miracle. In one spasm, all the

roof glass fissured together, the metal bonding preventing its breaking open or dropping through, keeping the outer skin whole, but letting it shatter internally. For a second there was a kaleidoscope of spattering lights, then a freckled darkness, and then full dark came back.

When the dull lamps winked on again, the only dark in there *was* the dark. The other Dark — that had vanished.

I knelt on the floor, shaking. Shaking too, I imagine, Hassent leant on a pen of sapphires.

"We had the same thought again," he said.

"That's generous. You had it first."

"Well, let's not debate our genius potency. We have whatever time is left before either 1) the whole ceiling collapses and we go back to the first chess-square, or 2) the ceiling collapses after the Great Lantern has passed but while the *real* sun is coming up. The only safe time was dusk. But we daren't wait."

"We can't stay here," I agreed.

"And meanwhile, up there, what chance do we have?"

"We've discovered now what it is."

"*They* learned that, the mighty magicians, but they couldn't do a thing."

I said flatly, "They were altruistic, perhaps, or guilty. It was their fault. We're innocent professional robbers."

"You have a plan?"

I nodded, ridiculously glad to be the one ahead this time.

YES, THEY HAD felt guilty. (A glance at those carvings of theirs showed what they believed loitered in the wretched soul of anyone with their sort of power — nasty little pawing squinting imps, only partly concealed by the foliage or curlicues of gracious living.)

Yet when they made their sun, they were high as balloons on the joy of their talents, and what they could do. Possibly they built it on a whim, because they wanted long summer evenings that went on till dawn. But maybe they were afraid of the dark in their souls.

And perhaps *that* facilitated the thing which happened. Their own ever-present self-distrust.

They launched the Great Lantern and outlawed night from their City forever. More, they *killed* the night there. Then there could only be twilight, a sunrise, and another sunrise.

If this were a story, you might say the night became angry. Out of rage at this bit of itself having been slaughtered in the City, it raised up its dead and let it loose for vengeance. But night has never harbored resentment, that I ever heard. It was only that, from every bright light there proceeds a shadow. That is one of the Laws of Balance which especially mages know very well. And their invented sun's shadow took on their fear of themselves. The stronger any light, too, the blacker the shade it generates. The Great Lantern was incandescent and convincing — and false. So the shadow it started was deadly, ominous, negative — and *alive*.

Animate things straying into the City, beasts, birds, people, stirred it up. Very likely it would lie almost quiescent when no one was about. Yet despite its birth from an unreal sun, in the violent light of any sun — therefore, the *true* sun — it must also be active. It was a *shadow*.

Not anything that gave light energized it; some things were too weak. Although I thought the sparkle had, a little, at least attracted its attention. *Solar* light was its catalyst and inspirator. But frankly I would have taken no chances on a fully visible and lushly lit window, let alone the moon. Moonless dusk, as earlier, was the only lucky time. Which meant that even if we had been able to stall until the following night, we would have stood not a chance. Tonight had been moonless. Tomorrow the moon was new.

Getting everything up the seventeen or eighteen staircases was quite a haul. We did it again in total darkness. That was the only way to be safe.

And at the top waited blasting fake daylight. And daylight's Shadow.

When we reached the area behind the outer Arrival Room, we kept well back, because through the windows the sun was boring, shining it all up to gold. The Great Lantern gives a radiance resembling that kind of ripe, syrupy desert sunset people remark on and praise. I hate that sort of sunset now.

"Ready?" he asked me.

"No. Let's do it."

Jade is always valuable. The black, white, and green jades for jewelry

and statues. The purple jade is also beautiful but has other properties worth a lot more.

There in the dark behind the light, a scratching began like giant mice. It was Hassent and me, maniacally working with the two flint-and-tinders, setting the ends of endless shards of purple jade alight. Brittle and easily broken, the material catches very quickly. The jade grows red-hot in seconds, so one must be quick in spinning it away. There is no *flame*, only a thick magenta smoke. It has been used for approximately two centuries in the most unprincipled ways, during warfare, or to control popular riots when kings become aggrieved. The jade burns for hours, the smoke thickens and spreads. It smells nice, and chokes you, you can see nothing in it; conversely, the damage to property is minimal, as no fire ever results. It is worth a fortune. We flung it back down the stairs, out over the Arrival Room, and, when the voluminous swirling miasma began to expand, advancing with the cloud, with our shirts tied over half our faces, we dropped it also clear of the balcony into the sunlit street.

I have heard them say, in the places they have used fire-conducting jade, called also so playfully, Plum-Breath, that it turned day to night, and put out the sun.

We put out the sun too, that sunny dead night in the City, Hass and I. Coughing and crowing, eyes streaming, and thinking we would probably anyway soon strangle and expire, we moved up the steps, over the plazas, along the boulevards, until we reached an outer wall. I can only guess how we climbed it, clinging retching and weeping on the ropes. But I said, I believe, he and I are strong. And the terror of certain death is always a wonderful incentive.

We got down the mountain wall too, only falling parts of the way, well-roped from practice, accumulating cuts, gashes, bruises, a cracked rib and chipped bone or two — nothing worth mentioning, really. Or I feel it is unworthy of mention, in the light — the *dark* — of the alternative.

We were not attacked. Nothing came near.

When we had got down in the valley, it was dawn. The sun rising was the actual sun. Staring back up, even if we could barely see with our tortured eyes, we beheld how the City of the magicians now perched under a chain of tiny umbrellas of Plum-Breath, which marked our escape route. The Great Lantern itself was invisible, then visible, coming and going as

it sank. But we heard something somewhere, crying. They were etiolate cries of anguish and excruciation beyond human comprehending, endurance, or pity.

We lay around in the valley for a few days. We took turns vomiting, complaining, drinking the local streams dry. Gradually full sight returned, and some sanity. (By then we had crawled on at least far enough not to have to see the City above, or its sun.) Hassent and I told each other that we were on the mend, although we found out, the hard way, that it would be another month before all the poison of the jade had been voided. Before we left the area entirely, the smoke had mostly faded overhead, though it was obvious how far it had drifted. And the lamentation of the thing which haunted the City, that had faded at last too, though now and then, in the stillness — just now and then, even a hundred miles off as we then were — Unless maybe, it was an aural hallucination.

From the treasure city we had brought out not a single valuable. All we had carried was as much purple jade as we could, and we had spent all that to save our lives. What is life worth, after all? To most of us, everything we have.

In the after days, trekking back, urt-less, over the desert toward civilization, we planned a dainty retribution on our helpful Source, who had experimentally sent us to die. We did not ever talk about the City. We never discussed either one ultimate thing — which was the reason no one had ever attempted to destroy the Great Lantern, the sun which had caused the creature of dead night. I will put this down, nevertheless, in case anyone ever thinks they would be doing us all a service (and incidentally enabling themselves to become incredibly rich) by smashing that unreal, second sun. *Leave it alone!* Why? Because the second sun is what keeps the creature in the City. If ever that disc goes out — all it will have left is the moon and the stars and the sun, and any other great lights of all this world *outside*. And then everywhere will be open to it, everywhere — and everyone of us.

Beware!



Damon Knight died this year at the age of 79. The task of introducing what might be his last story looks to be too much for this editor. Do I summarize his contributions to F&SF, going back his classic "Not With a Bang" in issue #2? Or do I try to make the case for the importance of the Futurians in Twentieth Century literature and describe how one group produced so many great editors and writers? (Editors!! What other group can rival the combined influence of Wollheim, Pohl, Merrill, and Knight?) How about the personal approach — try to describe reading his anthology The Dark Side at age 12, or his Creating Short Fiction, at 13, or The Futurians at 23? Or maybe an attempt at describing his role as pater familias of science fiction?

Nah. I think it would have pleased Damon more to see this story introduced with the joke he told me gleefully last time I saw him: A skeleton walks into a bar and says, "Give me a beer and a mop."

Watching Matthew

By Damon Knight

1. Little bones

I 'M BLIPPING OUT OF THAT place, the dormhouse or whatever you call it, and in two ticks I'm up in the sunlight, getting a bird's-eye view of

Dog River. I can see the two white frame houses side by side near the corner of Eighth and Columbia, each with a half-enclosed porch about big enough for a burial. The front of the house on the right, where our parents live, has two windows, one of them closed by heavy drapes; it's like a witch-face with one eye open and one shut.

I can tell by looking that it's the summer of 1933, when you're ten years older than I will ever be; Matt Kolb. There you are, all by yourself at the back of the strip of lawn between the houses. You're driving a post into the turf, using a croquet mallet for a hammer. Beside you is the croquet set in its rack — another post, five more mallets and six balls striped around their middles black, red, yellow, green, white, orange, one color for each.

Later you'll fill out, but now you're a skinny kid with horn-rimmed

glasses and a lot of hair. Just above your hairline is a scar where Father says you fell down when you were a baby. You're frowning as you work. If you think you've made a mistake, you grab your own nose and wobble it fiercely. You're learning Latin and German from Father, but he thinks you don't get enough exercise.

When you're finished with the first post, you pick up the other one and take it to the front of the yard. You kneel there and move the second post back and forth by half-inches until you have it lined up with the first post and the standpipe in the middle of the lawn. You're trying to get it mathematically precise, like Mother when she sets the dinner table with knives and spoons.

You hold the second post in position while you get to your feet, then hammer the post in firm and straight. You rub the back of your neck as you walk to the rear of the lawn; that means you have felt my presence, but you don't know what it is; you just think you have a prickle in the back of your neck.

I follow you behind the house, past the garden with its neat rows of bean frames and tomato tepees. At the end of the driveway the garage doors stand open, and the space inside is orderly in deep shadow. Everything here belongs to Father, and everything is in its place. On one wall, behind a padlocked door of heavy fencing in a wooden frame, hangs a cabinet full of tools. Everything sharp is in there — hoe, shovel, pickaxe, axe, hatchet, garden trowel, even the scissors and kitchen knives. If you wanted to take any tools, you'd have to get through the fencing with wire cutters. The catch is that if there were wire cutters anywhere in the garage, they'd be in the cabinet.

Nearby in an open bin are a pair of brown-stained gardening gloves and two stakes made from scrap one-by-twos. The pointed ends, roughly shaped with a hatchet, are blunted from being driven into the dirt so many times. Father uses the stakes to lay out his furrows in the garden, and you use them too by special permission. The stakes are tied together with twine, and the twine is wrapped around one of the stakes in a large egg-shaped lump.

I blip up again, and as I drift above the houses I can see children converging from three directions. Leroy McKenzie and another boy are running together down Eighth Street toward the back yards; Ted Underwood

and Rick Hogan are on their way from the dead end of Columbia Street, and Neola Collier is just emerging from the yellow house across the way.

By the time I get back, you've run the twine from one croquet post to the other, wrapping it around the standpipe in the middle of the lawn. The standpipe is a piece of iron pipe that stands up about a foot off the ground, with a valve and a hose connection at the top. The valve always drips a little, no matter how hard you turn it off.

Leroy and his friend walk up together. "Who's this?" you say.

"He's my cousin. His name's Pete Bryan. Can he play too?"

"I guess, unless there's too many." You run the twine back to the first stake again, halve it to find the center, and put a wicket there. Neola comes up the lawn, then Rick and Ted, and they all stand watching. You put two more wickets at either end, then a wicket all the way over to one side, midway between the middle and end wickets, and another opposite. Then two more just like them in the other half of the court.

You look at your watch. "Okay, let's start. Pete, you know how to play?"

"No."

"We'll show you. Pick a color and take a mallet and ball." The other kids already have theirs, and the only color left is black.

"Okay, put your ball a mallet's-head length from the first wicket, see, like this. Now just knock the ball through these two wickets. You get one more shot for each wicket you go through."

Pete hits the ball awkwardly and it bounces off the first wicket. "Do I get to go again?"

"Not right now. Wait till it's your turn."

The game proceeds decorously, according to rule and custom, until Rick Hogan knocks his ball through the first two wickets and hits Pete's ball. He moves his ball next to Pete's, puts his foot on his own ball, and whacks it so hard that Pete's ball flies down to the end of the lawn. Then Rick hits Ted's ball, takes two shots, and gets into position behind the side wicket.

In the next round Rick goes through the two front wickets, hits the post, goes back through the same wickets and hits your ball, knocks it the length of the court. Hitting other players' balls and going through wickets,

he winds up in front of the end two wickets. You try to hit him from your corner of the field, and miss.

Rick goes through the last two wickets, but instead of hitting the stake, knocks his ball away from it and becomes a rover. He hits your ball and knocks it to the front of the court, hits Leroy's ball and slams it the other way, hits Pete's ball. Ted and Neola go over to him, and Ted says, "Hey, you don't have to hit everybody all the time." Rick pushes Ted, who falls over the standpipe and hurts his leg.

Rick's cheeks are flushed. He turns, raises his mallet like a golf club, takes a full swing and knocks the black ball bouncing across the street into the Colliers' yard. Then he throws his mallet against the side of the house and walks away. The others watch him moving slowly, straight-backed, up the middle of the street out of sight. "What's the matter with him?" Pete asks Ted.

"You know his dog Rex?"

"Yeah."

"He got runned over by a car. Rick's brother Oren went and shot Rex with his gun, and Rick didn't want him to, so he's mad."

They hear a rapping and look up. The curtain has been drawn back in the corner window and they see the pink-jowled face of Mother there. Her eyes are bulging with anger, one more than the other. She shakes her finger at them and drops the curtain.

"Is that Matt's mother?" Leroy asks.

"Yeah. I seen her once before, like this, through the window."

"She never goes downtown or anything?"

"No."

Ted is up, limping a little. All the kids are walking away now. In a few minutes they're all gone except Neola, who brings you the black ball that Rick knocked into her yard. The ball is split halfway around the middle, showing its brown pressed-wood interior. The croquet set is ruined. You're taking deep breaths, trying not to cry.

"Sorry," Neola says.

"Okay."

Neola walks back across the street, goes into her house and closes the door. You begin gathering the wickets and posts. You pick up the stakes and twine and put them back in the garage. You carry the croquet set

through the back porch into the kitchen, where the worn linoleum shows the edges of the warped floorboards underneath. No one is there, but through the open doorway you can see Father in the living/dining room, grading papers at the table. Father looks up. "Good game, son?"

You do not reply. This is always the way it is; I think I'm going to make it come out different this time, but that never works. When you open the basement door, a cold air breathes up. I follow you down the dusty unpainted stairs; you put the croquet set under the stairs where it belongs, then climb up again to your lonesome room, but I keep going all the way to the back of the basement, under the dirt, down through the black darkness to that place, whatever you call it. Where the little bones are.

2. *All this*

Matt Kolb, you're sixteen now, a high-school sophomore in Dog River, Oregon, and I'm your twin, the dead one, following you around: invisible, impalpable, unthinkable, just a damp skin of nothing at all that sticks to you wherever you go. They have never told you about me, and you'll never find out in this life, but you sense me out of the corner of your brain like a floater in your eyeball.

As Somerset Maugham said in another connection (or will say, I don't care which), there are great advantages in being dead; I'm j-j-just trying to think what they are. Where I exist is outside your time, and I know things you don't — for instance, I know we're only three years and eight months from Pearl Harbor, a necessary event in the scheme of history, but you're on a tangent now and may not get there.

Mother is in the locked ward in Salem and probably is not coming back. Father doesn't go out to his lodge meetings anymore — he says he doesn't want to leave you alone at night, but in fact he doesn't want to leave you with anyone else either. After bedtime you hear the sounds of men's voices in the living room, the mountain coming to Mohammed. What do the brothers do there? Mother used to pretend they took off all their clothes and danced around in their little aprons.

You make your own school lunches a day ahead of time (baloney sandwiches, an egg, sometimes a tomato). Father cooks dinner when he

gets home (pork chops, hamburger, or macaroni and cheese). The kitchen knives are in the kitchen now, not locked up in the garage as they used to be.

Father leaves the house earlier than you do and gets home later; you have a house key, which you are forbidden to carry because you might lose it — you hide it under the doormat every morning. No one else comes to the house except the mailman and Mrs. Collier, who cleans once a week. And me, but I'm no company even when I'm out of the basement.

Now we're walking up 13th Street in the damp cool of the morning, past silent houses and empty yards. The steep ascent is no problem, we're used to that, but we're late as usual and have to hustle. Students with cars zip past us. Father says he won't buy a car till you're a senior. Then it will be a family car, not your car, but he'll teach you to drive. He wants to toughen you up, and has given you a ratty third-hand set of golf clubs, with which you dutifully trudge around the links by yourself on weekends.

Doesn't it seem a long time ago when the whole neighborhood gathered for hide and seek under the lilacs? Or when the kids came to your lawn for the croquet? In their early teens they all grew in different directions, joined other groups, left you behind. You're an outcaste now, a bug in the margin of the big happy class book. Against all evidence, you have faith that school will someday end. After that you will get out of Dog River, go to New York or Paris. Or Berlin, where the crazies live.

Du bist verrückt, mein Kind.

Du mus' fahren nach Berlin,

Wo die Verrückten sind.

La la, la la, la.

Here's the high school, a crouching monster with two mouths like doorways, one open, one shut. Yellow buses are unloading students from the Valley, most of them Nisei. Your old classmate Roku is not among them; he lives in town now, where his father has a store. Anyhow, he hangs around with the lettermen.

Three juniors are huddled on the lawn near the entrance. One of them, Red Nichols, says "Hi, Brain," then seizes his own pants-leg, pulls it tight, and farts. The others laugh.

You go inside to your locker. Right 17, left 31, right 10. The multiple

slamming of lockers reminds you of the movie last Saturday at the Rialto, when the vast German dreadnought echoed to the tread of marching men. A sudden explosion. White-uniformed officers are racing past. "*Spurlos versenkt!*" Red Nichols falls in his sailor suit, punctured by flying shrapnel. Black blood pours from his nose and mouth. He holds his arms up in mute appeal, but you step over him and follow the crowd into American History.

Mr. Mueller is talking about England at the time of the American Revolution. "And a loaf of bread cost only two dee."

You raise your hand. "The *d* is for denarius. It's pronounced 'pence.'"

Mueller smiles with pleasure. "Well, I never heard that before."

Later somebody passes you a note. "Draconian meeting changed to eleven o'clock." *The Draconian* is the school magazine; it comes out twice a year. At eleven you get an excuse and a dirty look from Mr. Phillips. You're failing algebra, not doing the homework, which means to Phillips that you're lazy, but those strings of symbols are Chinese to you. You made a cartoon about that for the school newspaper, *The Guide*; it did not amuse Phillips, to whom algebra is as clear as the alphabet.

The *Draconian* staff was hand-picked by Miss Fessenden, and that's why you are on it, although Dick Mayfield wishes you weren't. He looks annoyed when he sees you come in. Dick is a big square-headed blond in a letterman's sweater that has three stripes and two pins. The reason he is the editor is that he likes to run things.

You sit down next to Margaret Hicks, across from Heather Boyd and Virginia Copeland, both well-groomed seniors in pastel sweater sets and pearls.

"Well, I see we're all here," says Dick, "so let's get started. Heather, do we have any new stuff to read?"

"No."

"Okay. That's actually good, because where we stand now, we have to turn in the whole magazine by next Friday, or the printer can't do it before graduation week. That right, Heather?"

"Yes."

"And, we only have sixteen pages to fill, and, what, twenty-two pages of stuff that we already decided we more or less like, not counting the contents page and my introduction that I haven't written yet."

"How long will the introduction be?" Virginia asks.

"Well, it depends what else is in the magazine, doesn't it? Probably a page and a half, but I could keep it down to one page, easy. So, what the heck, call it one page for the introduction and one for the contents page, that means there's room for fourteen pages of other stuff. So we're eight pages over. You got the stories, Heather?"

"No, I thought you had them."

"Oh, sorry." Dick reaches behind him, stretches easily to the bookshelf and brings back a manila folder. He opens it on the table. "Okay, here," he says, holding up a manuscript you recognize as your own. He dangles it from one corner. "This thing I never did like, and it's seven pages long, so there's the problem practically solved. Any objections?"

"What didn't you like, Dick?" Margaret asks.

"It's crazy. Little naked people walking around on a star?"

You clear your throat. "Jupiter isn't a star."

He gives you a can't-believe-this look. "It isn't? What is it then?"

"It's a planet."

Dick looks at the ceiling. Virginia says, "I kind of liked the little Jupiterians. I thought they were cute."

After a moment Dick tosses the typescript onto the middle of the table and folds his arms. "Okay, tell me what you want to do." Looked at the right way, he's wearing a hangman's noose that pushes his head to one side; he is dangling from a gibbet, cross-eyed, and his tongue is out.

"Let's all copy down the names of the stories and poems and how many pages they are, and then mark the ones we think we should leave out," Virginia says.

"Okay, fine, do it." Dick hands the list to Virginia, who begins reading the titles aloud. You are so frozen with resentment that you put a mark beside your own story. Then the worst of the three poems, for a total of eight pages. But when Virginia tallies the votes, your story has survived. Missing are the two next-longest stories and one of the poems. That leaves two stories and two poems, and Dick's introduction. It will be a sad little issue, just what everybody expects of *The Draconian*, but you are feeling a curious mixture of elation and guilt. Now your story will be part of the permanent record, where any scholar can dig it up and quote it indulgently

when he writes his biography of you. Forty years ahead, when Dick Mayfield is still in jail for wife-beating and mopery.

At noon you take your lunch box out the back way to the slope above the bleachers, where if you lie flat in the grass you can't be seen from the school above or the bleachers below. Through your mucosa I smell the cut grass, and I sample the sandwich while you eat it: white bread not quite stale, greasy margarine, lettuce, spiced baloney almost overripe.

For the hard-boiled egg you have salt and pepper shakers borrowed from the kitchen; Father would not approve if he knew, but he doesn't, because you always put them back. The egg yolk is blue-green outside, and you're thinking of a story you will never write, about a scientist who takes his vat-grown superchildren to another world, an empty blue-green world where they grow up wise and strong, but so godlike in intelligence that they can no longer be bothered talking to their creator. The title you are thinking of is "Promised Land."

Then half a pickle, the emerald of vegetables.

IN THE AFTERNOON you get out of class again to work on the school paper. *The Guide* is put to bed on Tuesday, folded and mimeographed on Wednesday, distributed on Thursday. You type a stencil from a layout pasted up by Margaret. The stencil is a sandwich of backing sheet, cushion sheet (like angels' toilet paper), and the blue waxy stencil itself on top. The type bar striking the stencil pushes the wax aside, leaving an impression through which the ink can ooze. When you type the wrong letter, you paint over it with correction fluid, wait for the fluid to dry, then type the right letter.

Fred Furlong, the editor, takes no part in these work sessions and is rarely seen in the *Guide* office, but today he looks in. "Miriam here?" Miriam Arnesen, the girls' sports editor, a bovine blonde, is Fred's girlfriend.

"Haven't seen her."

Fred comes farther into the room, smiling. He is a good-looking boy, dark-haired, wearing a beige cashmere sweater. "Matt, I hear you've got a good story coming up in the *Draconian*. Congratulations."

"Thanks."

"We ought to talk sometime. You want to come over after school today?"

"Uh, sure."

"Here's the address." He hands you a card. "See you later." He waves and is gone.

You have a feeling something is happening that you don't understand. Fred is out of your class in two senses: he is a senior, two years ahead of you, and his family is one of the richest in Dog River. You have a box Brownie; Fred has a movie camera.

You go back to your typing, make two errors side by side, correct them badly. The center pops out of an o; the stencil is ruined. You start another.

Miriam Arnesen comes in and deposits something in the wire basket. She is large and pink, with Valkyrie braids and pale eyelashes. "Have you seen Fred?" she asks.

"Yes, about half an hour ago. He was looking for you."

Her smile is slow and placid. "Oh, well, he'll find me."

Suddenly you wonder: what if Fred gave you a false address, so that he and all his friends can laugh at you tomorrow? Your heart is thudding.

"Miriam, do you know where Fred lives?"

"Sure."

"What's the address?"

"One ten Churchill. Why?"

"He asked me over there after school."

"Mm." The slow smile again. "He must really like you."

"I don't know why — what he wants."

She shakes her head. The braids swing. "I don't either. Why don't you ask him? Bye-bye."

When she is gone, you find Churchill Street in the Dog River map. It is on the ridge at the northwest end of town, about a mile from here.

At four o'clock you're standing in front of your open locker, dithering about the lunch box. If you show up carrying it, you may look ridiculous, but if you leave it, there will be complicated adjustments to make. You take the lunch box with the feeling of a decision postponed.

At noon the sky was clear, but now the sun is only a yellow stain on a high blanket of cloud. The long parade of students thins out as it passes

the Heights business section with its sandwich shops and candy stores. Presently you are walking alone.

Ahead of you the street rises gently to a ridge of low houses. You hide your lunch box in a culvert; you can pick it up on your way back.

One ten Churchill is at the top of the rise, a big gray one-story house, with white trim and black carriage lamps. Nowhere is there any sign of age or wear. Geraniums in green wooden planters are on the porch, azaleas in mulched beds in the lawn. A young maple has shed a few premature leaves. Two cars and a lawnmower are visible through the open garage doors. You step up on the porch, lift the brass door knocker and tap.

Fred opens the door smiling. "You made it," he says. "Come on in."

The living room has a waxed wooden floor, rag rugs, a beige davenport and armchair. Fred waves you to the chair, then drops on the davenport with his arms behind his head. He looks at you with a secret smile.

"You're a loner, pretty much, aren't you, Matt?"

"I guess."

"No friends in school?"

"One or two. Not like your gang."

Fred's smile widens. "Those kind of friends. They hang around because I can take them on my father's boat in Yachats. Or I buy them little things. It's easy to make friends when you've got money."

"I guess."

Fred shifts on the davenport. "What will you do when you get out of school?"

"Go to New York. Be a cartoonist."

"Seriously?"

"Maybe art school first."

"I envy you. It's college for me, then I go into Dad's business. You know, anybody can add up numbers, but art is a gift, isn't it? Suppose I offered you a whole lot of money, would you trade me your gift?"

You shake your head. "Money would be nice to have, but."

"Too bad." He stands up. "Like to see the house?"

You follow him through a house that is empty and silent. Dining room with a long polished table, sideboard, candles in a silver holder. Kitchen, yellow walls, black floor.

"Where is everybody?"

"Dad and Mom are in Seattle. Mandy's home sick. She's the cook. I'm on my own. Come on, I'll show you something else."

You go out through a recreation room — ping-pong table, dart board. Behind the house is a wide flagstone patio, then a little strip of lawn. Other houses, other back yards, are spread out below in descending tiers.

Fred reaches up to curl his fingers around a limb of the young oak near the edge of the lawn. A falling leaf hangs in midair. "Look," he says.

Below, a silver skin of light covers the rooftops, the empty streets. You can see all the way to the horizon and beyond. Not a creature is stirring. The world has stopped, and it is empty. You think about the novel *The Purple Cloud* — what it would be like to be the last man on Earth.

All this I can give you, Fred says.

You look up at the sky for help, but no one is there.

3. *In the dark*

It's your life, Matt Kolb, not mine, though I follow you everywhere like a wraith on a string. I'm your invisible twin, your benchmark: I see you when you're sleeping and I know when you're awake. You're snoring now in your overheated little studio apartment on Lexington Avenue. Your mouth is wide open; I'm sure I could see your tonsils if you had any.

Now you're awake. You shower, shave, go down to the Greek's for breakfast (two scrambled eggs, bacon, white toast). This is your ninth winter in New York, isn't it, and what have you done with all those years? You lived on money from home, drew pulp illustrations of women in diaphanous draperies (five dollars apiece — they didn't pay the rent); then you were an assistant editor at twenty-five dollars a week, then a reader for a literary agency, had an annulled marriage, and now you are a stripper in an offset platemaking shop. You're traveling the wrong way on the rainbow, maybe, but you like this job because stripping (which doesn't involve taking your clothes off) resembles the mimeography you used to do in high school, and because it gives you an appetite.

The platemaking shop is south of Canal, on a grim street of granite and wrought iron. Every morning, when you go there, you enter a big room with three glass-topped drafting tables along one wall, a fourth on the opposite side. Today the room is decorated with green and red crepe paper

stapled around the walls; a scrawny Christmas tree cowers in the corner like December Morn. A radio is playing "All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth."

As you stand in the steamy warmth taking off your gloves and overcoat, you see that half a dozen people are already here. Lisa Gorman, one of the partners, is at her desk sorting envelopes and talking quietly to her gofer, Beth Bamforth. Lisa's pink smock covers a multitude of bulges; Beth, who is young and willowy but long in the jaw, wears a violet wool dress. Jacob Stenzler, the badger-bearded chief stripper, is at his station on the left side of the room, and so are Tom and Rachel on the right.

Lisa's business partner, Paul Trimm, a silent man who never seems to do anything but carpentry, stands by his workbench contemplating a piece of pine. His bulldog pipe is in his mouth. The shelves he builds always disappear into the platemaking room. How many shelves can they need back there?

As you hang up your coat, the door opens on a cold breeze; the platemakers, Angelo and Norman, enter together, slapping each other's shoulders as if to brush off invisible snow, and crowd you a little as they take off their overcoats. Angelo is nineteen, smooth and muscular as a dolphin; Norman, curly-haired, is in his thirties. "Hallelujah, brother!" says Angelo. Then the two of them, arms around each other's shoulders, dance like Dorothy and the Tin Woodman into the back room. Rachel Huffman, the new stripper, applauds; the rest look on without expression, except for Jacob, who exhales a cloud of pipe smoke as if there were a gnat in it.

Beth is handing out manila envelopes to the strippers. She puts two on Rachel's table, three on yours, and gives you a pink smile. There is a bond between you; she is educated and believes you are too because of the way you talk. On your right, Tom Donnelly is sitting with his hands in his pockets, rumpled as usual, staring at his tabletop. Tom is a former partner in a platemaking shop, dumped long ago for some unknown disgrace. Today he looks as if he's wearing yesterday's shirt. He has steel-gray hair, not much of it, gray eyes, black-rimmed glasses. He's a legend in this room. At the water cooler one day Lisa made some remark about his pot belly, and Tom replied, "I'll put mine up against yours anytime, Lisa."

"Everything okay?" you ask him.

He speaks out of the side of his mouth without turning his head. "I'm just sitting here saying '*Shit*.'"

"Buck up," you say, "only ten more days to Christmas."

Tom snorts. You flick the switch that illuminates your table, open your first envelope and look at the negatives. It's a poster ad for a kitchen gadget; the headline, in transparent letters on the black background, reads:

SLICES ANYTHING!! ONLY \$1.95!!!

You tape a sheet of yellow paper to the table and begin aligning the two negatives on it, one halftone-screened, the other not. You tape them down at the corners and begin cutting away part of each to make one composite negative that the boys in the back room will use to make the plate.

Rachel's hands with their many bracelets are still in her lap. She is a handsome, high-colored young woman dressed today in purple and green. "Oh, boy, have I got a stummick cake," she says. "I was to my brother's on Long Guyland last night? I nevva shoulda ate the asparagus, it makes me bilious."

You offer her a Tum. "Would this help?"

"Maybe, if I took the whole *bottle*." A funny catch in her voice where the double *t* in "bottle" should be.

When Rachel goes to the water cooler with her tablet, Beth leans down to you confidentially. "Did you hear the glottal stop?" she asks, smiling. She puts the same funny pop in the middle of "glottal." You don't know how to reply: what is a glottal stop, exactly?

When Rachel gets up again, you try several times to reproduce the word as she spoke it. Tom rumbles, "Something wrong with your goddam throat today, I guess."

"No."

"Want some advice?"

"Sure."

"Put a *sock* in it."

You turn the yellow paper, tape it down again, and cut away the center portion. There are still a few transparent specks on the negative. You dab them with opaquing fluid; it is violet-brown, redder when it dries. You drop the finished job in your *out* basket and pick up another envelope.

Rachel is back, cautiously cutting her yellow paper. An exclamation, she sucks a broken fingernail. Angelo appears from the back room wearing what at first looks like a gray wig, but is in reality the head of a dirty mop held behind him by Norman. The radio is playing *Jingle Bells*; Angelo turns it off, then strikes an attitude with one hand on his heart and the other extended toward Jacob Stenzler. He sings,

*Some farblondjet evening, you will meet a Stenzler.
You will meet a Stenzler across a crowded room.
And somehow you'll know, you'll know even then,
That somewhere you'll meet him again and again.*

Rachel is red-faced with suppressed laughter; Jacob and Lisa look gloomy. Beth at her station and Paul at his workbench seem bewildered.

Angelo bows repeatedly. "Thank you, thank you, you are so kind." He kisses his fingers, waves them right and left; then he and Norman disappear through the doorway. Lisa and Beth are deep in conversation. Perhaps Angelo has gone too far this time; but after all, it's Christmas.

You go to the toilet, a malodorous closet built of gypsum board. Inside, on one wall an untrained artist has drawn the outline of a naked woman; some critic has scraped away the whole crotch with a knife blade. On the opposite wall a quatrain has been censored in the same way:

*Those who write on bathroom walls
roll their in little balls
and those who read these lines of wit
eat those little balls of !!*

You target two floating cigaret butts, pull the chain and send them whirling down to darkness. Where will they end up, in Australia, spinning clockwise?

In the afternoon Beth brings you an old set of negatives; it looks like something that has been in the files for years. The red dots of the opaquing are childish, splattered at random, sometimes overlapping the halftone. You show it to Tom, laughing. "Look at this!"

He leans closer. "Keep your trap shut. That's *her* work — Lisa did

those." You glance at Lisa. She is not looking at you and her expression tells you nothing, but you know she has heard.

Angelo emerges again with his mop wig held by Norman. Flinging out his arms to Lisa and Beth, he sings,

*Now Betty was a servant maid
And she a place had got
To wait upon two ladies fair.
These ladies' name was Scott.
Now Bett a certain talent had,
She anything could handle,
And for these ladies every night
She used a large thick candle.*

Lisa's face is pale. Angelo bows, kisses his fingers and retreats, followed by Norman. From the back room their voices can be heard in close harmony:

We two queens of Orient are...

Paul turns the radio on; it comes to life in the middle of *Joy to the World*, with chimes. You're thinking that you haven't bought a card to send to your parents at home; better do that tomorrow. Something nonsectarian and cheery, with a note, "Thanks for the check."

At four o'clock Beth distributes the pay envelopes. Yours, opened, disgorges two tens, a five, three singles, a quarter, a dime, and a buffalo nickel. Tom counts his money, then leans over to you. "Let's whoop it up tonight," he growls. "My wife is supposed to meet me at Leary's. We'll get something to eat, then do the bars. Are you game?"

This is the first time anyone in the shop has invited you anywhere. "Where's Leary's?"

"Stick with me, I'll take you. It's a crummy place, but the roast beef is good."

At the end of the day, when people are standing up getting their coats, Rachel still sits at her table with three unopened envelopes. You hear her mutter, "Why did I take this rotten job?"

"You'll get the hang of it," you tell her. She does not reply. You think, maybe she's lonesome and would like to be invited to dinner; too late now.

You walk with Tom northward up the dark street toward a pink sky-glow. Tom is shorter than you; his pork-pie hat is pulled down over his eyes and his hands are in his pockets. Snow crystals around the two of you in the air are so fine that they are visible only in the street lights, but you can feel them melting on your lips. The sensation makes you feel closer to Tom, although neither of you speaks.

You pass a dry cleaner's, closed, then a corner drugstore, open, but its lights go out as you pass. Then the bars on Canal Street. Leary's is a dark, narrow beer-smelling place with a row of tables in the back. A jukebox is racketing out "The Yellow Rose of Texas." The withered gray woman at one of the tables turns out to be Tom's wife, Myra. She looks ten years older than Tom; the only color in her face is the pink tip of her nose. "Glad to meet you," she says almost inaudibly. Her fingers are narrow and chilly.

Tom looks happy to be here, comfortable with the beer fumes and the noise. He says, "Tonight is on us, Matt, so the sky's the limit. We got a little *Christmas present* from a lawyer, can you beat that? Not enough to buy a *bond*, too much to throw in the gutter, so we're going to spend it on *drink*."

Tom orders roast beef dinners for himself and Myra. You order corned beef and cabbage, a glass of milk, and a slice of chocolate cream pie. The corned beef is greasy; you eat potatoes and bread to soak it up. Tom is drinking a rye highball with his meal, and Myra has a cocktail with a cherry in it.

You are beginning to wonder what you've let yourself in for. You have never been able to afford whisky and have no head for it, but you have never been able to swill beer either. Can you buy an empty jug to pour it into? "I'm saving this for later"?

The next bar has a dance floor and is thumping with a polka. Your beer comes in a stein; it is flat and almost too cold to drink. Tom says in your ear, "Are you having *fun*? Had any good *lays* lately?"

All these places seem to be full of the same yellow light. The fourth bar has a piano player doing fancy runs at the end of every phrase, and there is a cover charge. Myra leans thoughtfully over her drink; she has not spoken since she said "Glad to meet you." Tom beckons you closer.

"Know something, we used to have a kid. I ever tell you that? Put'm in a military school. In Virginia. It cost an arm and a leg every year to send'm there. Not counting the *extras*." He taps you on the arm with two stiff fingers. "You know what that kid did? He shot himself. Put a bullet in's rifle and pulled the trigger with his toe. How you like that?"

"Oh, Jesus, Tom."

"Never mind. Drink up. You still drinking that damn beer? Have a shot of whisky, God damn it. Put hair on your chest." You order the shot. It is warming after the beer, and makes you feel remote from all disgrace and discomfort.

Tom pays the checks with a sprawl of dollar bills taken from his pocket. Between bars you walk in a close threesome, stumbling and swaying, with Myra in the middle. Her sharp shoulder strikes your ribs in the same place every time. She seems to be singing quietly, but you can't make out the words or the tune.

Later, you sit in a row on the cane seat. Tom's and Myra's heads rock with the swaying of the car. The train emerges from underground, and you cross a bridge across an unknown river. Beyond in the blackness, isolated lights wink like the cottage candles of the damned. You have no idea where you are.

Down the stairs, swaying together on an empty sidewalk, then up another stairway smelling of damp. Tom unlocks the door into a railroad apartment: the first room is the kitchen. He turns on the light over the stove. "Take coat off," he says. "Just a sec." Myra has gone through into the next room and is sitting on a dark couch.

You stand in the doorway, not knowing how to get past Tom. Tom gets eggs from the refrigerator, breaks them into a bowl. He puts an iron skillet on the stove.

After a while you realize that he has not moved for a long time. He is standing in front of the stove, swaying a little, head bowed and jaw hanging, as if he has forgotten what eggs are and what a stove is. Myra watches him sphinx-eyed from the other room.

You back away, try to close the door, but the knob slips through your fingers and you can still see into the yellow glow of the kitchen. To your right, a door opens on another yellow kitchen and another motionless Tom. Another just like it opens on your left. You turn and see a fourth

room spring to light behind you. Four kitchens, four Toms. Then, one at a time and in the same order, they go out. And you're alone in the dark.

4. The willows

This is your life, Matt Kolb, and I'm still the murdered twin who follows you around, although in the ripeness of your age you live in France, five thousand miles from Oregon and the basement where my little bones are buried. The lawn and garden are dead like me, the cherry trees have been cut down and the house trashed by renters, but nobody has dug me up yet.

You're an old party now, and your well-trimmed white beard, you believe, is esthetically pleasing because it balances the bald dome of your skull. In general, the French consider beards unhygienic, but yours reminds them of Colonel Sanders and Wild Bill Hickock. They think of you as a monument, an avant-garde Old West author, and they hang around you at cocktail parties to hear what outrageous or ignorant thing you may come out with next.

It's the spring of 1998, a good year for the dollar, and you've been traveling down the Rhône valley in a rented Opel with your son Arthur and his wife. Arthur is a chemist; he started manufacturing industrial essences ten years ago and is getting very rich. Sharon owns a chain of hardware stores in Los Angeles and is rich too. They have a little daughter, Melissa, left behind with Sharon's mother because she developed a sniffle at the last minute. Sharon keeps in touch by cell phone.

Sharon is all soft curves, soft sweaters, wavy hair in a French bun, but occasionally you get a glimpse inside and she is keen as a knife. You have the feeling that she is still taking your measure. Sometimes she calls you "Papa," because she thinks you're trying to look like Hemingway. She doesn't wear jewelry, except for a gold wedding band, and neither does Arthur. They don't dress for ostentation, no rings, no Patek Phillipe watches.

Arthur is a casualty of your first divorce. He thinks if he discovers the trick of getting close to you, he may gain the important father-son bonding he missed when he was a child. Sometimes he believes the breakup of that marriage was your fault and sometimes he blames his mother. He and Sharon are in therapy, jointly and singly.

Now you're pulling off the highway into downtown Aix-en-Provence. When Arthur finds out how the name is pronounced, he starts calling it "Aches and Pains," but he doesn't mean it, and he's cheerful, glad to get out of the Opel and stretch his legs. You leave the car in a parking lot and stroll back to the Cours Mirabeau, a beautiful tree-shaded boulevard that is quiet and peaceful this morning. You three sit around a sidewalk table and order the *fruits de mer*, little mollusks displayed in a pyramid, every color from primrose to violet, each more delectable than the last. Arthur holds them close to his big nostrils before he eats them. "Esters and terpenes," he says. "Mm."

"Could you duplicate that in the laboratory, Arthur?"

"Never. The food here is something else, Dad. How do they do it?"

"Cuisine, and the fresh ingredients. You can't get anything like this in Paris, even if the chef is Provençal."

A young woman at a table near yours closes her eyes every time she puts a forkful of something wonderful in her mouth. You're thinking you would like to live here and eat nothing but Provençal food, but then would you lose the contrast?

After lunch you walk over to the center of town and do the shops. Sharon buys a few scarves, Arthur some knitted neckties and hand-carved swizzle-sticks, just to be buying something. You find a necklace of semiprecious stones that takes your fancy. Then you check in at the hotel south of town. Arthur announces that he wants a nap. You leave him in the room and invite Sharon down to the patio for a drink, but she doesn't want wine or liquor. She orders a vanilla ice cream.

"Everything all right?" you ask.

She stirs the ice cream with a spoon. "Arthur wants a trial separation."

"Oh, dear. What about you?"

"Trial separations usually turn into divorces, don't you think? You were divorced, and now it's our turn. What about your parents, were they divorced?"

"No."

"Mine were. My shrink says I'm convinced that any man I love will leave me sooner or later, and I always make sure it's sooner so I can be in control."

"Do you believe that?"

"I guess so. Life is a bitch, isn't it?"

"Very often. It's the only one we've got." You're looking back over your life as a rounded whole, an egg-shape that means something, but how can you tell her that?

In your pocket is the necklace you bought earlier, teardrops of semiprecious stones on a silver chain, agate, jasper, tiger's eye, amber, moonstone, and a few things you don't recognize, clear colors, smooth to the fingers. "I don't know who I bought this for," you say. "I don't suppose it's your kind of thing."

"I'll wear it anyway." She holds out her hand and smiles. "Thanks, Papa."

In the afternoon you do the museums. Arthur and Sharon are subdued. They look at the tapestries without comment, and seem to avoid standing too close to each other. If they have had a quarrel, it hasn't cleared the air. Then a famous restaurant for the lamb chops à l'arlésienne, not bad but overpriced and overpresented. Arthur and Sharon are glum.

The next day, very early in the morning, you resign yourself to wakefulness, get dressed and walk out alone down toward the river. The air is cool and moist. Birds are singing in the luminous sky. The sun is veiled by a drift of cloud; below it you can see the bright spark of Saturn enthroned. As you pass a stand of willows, you notice someone standing there. It's your father just as you remember him, in his gold-framed spectacles and the gold chain looping across his vest. He's holding his staghorn jackknife with the big blade extended. He looks down at you from his great height and says, "I want you to remember this, Matthew."

You move closer. "What, Father?"

"Watch closely." He slices through a willow shoot. He trims it to a clear straight section about four inches long, and drops the extra pieces on the ground.

"The right time to do it is in the spring when the sap is running," he says. "Feel here." You touch the cut end of the shoot; it is moist and cool, like a piece of cheese.

He takes the piece back and cuts off a diagonal slice from the end, making it resemble the mouthpiece of a flute. "This is the hard part," he says. "If you break the bark, you have to start over." He works the blade

of his knife under the bark, around and around, until he has loosened it and can slip it off in one piece. He moves the bark tube up and down to show you, then puts it back in place with a little bare wood at the far end. Now he cuts a shallow groove near the top of the mouthpiece. "This is the airhole."

"You never let me do that myself, Father."

"Watch." He takes the bark tube off again and cuts a sliver of wood from the top of the mouthpiece. "Be parsimonious, you can always cut more." He puts the bark on again and blows into the whistle. A resonant honk comes out.

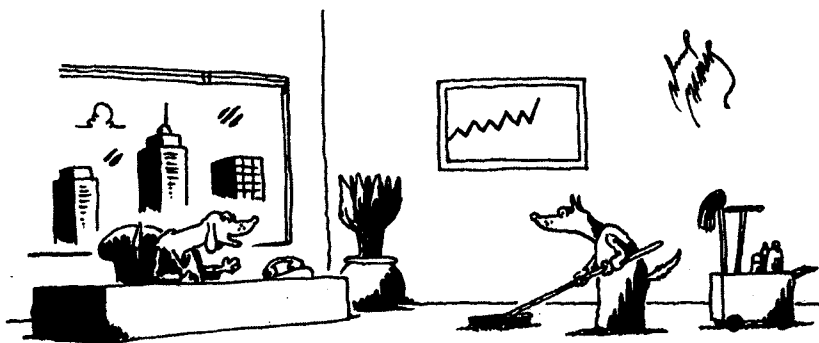
"Is that it?" you ask.

"That's all."

"Father, I never learned that, and I never taught Arthur."

"It's a dying art." You notice that he is coming slowly nearer without moving. His head and body are growing larger and at the same time sinking into the ground like an elevator. "*Tempus edax rerum*," he says. Time devours all things. Now he's just a head, but it is like Humpty Dumpty's, taller than you are, and as it moves toward you his mouth opens into a cavern and you're falling at last into the leaf-mold darkness where I live.

Here we are. Welcome home, brother. ॐ



"The only difference between you and me, Flanders,
is that I read the homework before I ate it."

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CURIOSITIES

THE END OF AN EPOCH, BY A. LINCOLN GREEN (1901)

IN THE twilight years of Victoria's reign, sf authors in Britain looked to the new century with foreboding.

Robert Cromie wrote of the threat of nuclear weapons in *The Crack of Doom* (1895), Thomas Mullett Ellis foresaw the use of anthrax in warfare in *Zalma* (1895), and M(atthew) P(hipps) Shiel described the destruction of life on Earth following a volcanic eruption in *The Purple Cloud* (1901). In a similar vein, the probably pseudonymous writer A. Lincoln Green wrote a memorable book. In *The End of an Epoch*, Adam Godwin, lone survivor after all other human life has been destroyed by a man-made bacteria, recounts his life in a Britain reverting back to nature.

The novel begins some years

after the devastation, with Adam musing over the mess his manuscript is in after a moose has entered his cabin (during the "insane" stage of the illness, a zoo worker had evidently liberated the animals in his charge). Adam recounts his travels in search of other survivors and his arrival in the ruins of London. There he lives on tinned foods, has an encounter with a big cat in St. Paul's Cathedral, and daily goes in fear of the marauding packs of wild dogs that live in Buckingham Palace. Humanity is saved when an expedition to the North Pole, where the bacteria was unable to survive, returns to London. Despite the ending, in which Adam pairs off with a female scientist named Eve, the book is a forgotten classic. Find it if you can. ☞

—John Eggeling

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